

# BEOWULF AND EPIC TRADITION

BY

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CAMBRIDGE  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
1928

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PRINTED AT THE HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
CAMBRIDGE, MASS., U. S. A.

TO

GEORGE LYMAN KITTREDGE



## Preface

**B**EOWULF occupies a unique position in the literature of Western Europe as the earliest poem of importance in any vernacular after the collapse of Roman civilization. It is the herald of modern letters, as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are of classical letters, and it is not unworthy of comparison with those earlier and greater epics. Like them, it reflects the manners and ideals of an age which may with some propriety be called "heroic." Its chief adventures are as fantastic as any in the wanderings of Ulysses, yet its historical background affords an unrivalled picture of the early life of our pagan ancestors. Political and social conditions are as vividly and as truthfully set forth as if there were no demons lurking in the mists at nightfall, no dragon watching on the windy heights. But the main importance of a great poem must lie in its poetry. As to this, no apologies for *Beowulf* are necessary. The tale itself and the traditions encircling it have all the authority of centuries of story-telling over ale-cups and by winter firesides. Then, in a happy hour, it became the theme of a gifted poet, and received its final epic form. Although it deals with the exploits of Scandinavian

heroes, it is a thoroughly English poem, written in the English language, in a verse and style characteristically English, and infused with the spirit and ideals of English folk. There is every reason why we of to-day who have inherited those traditions should know *Beowulf*, and appreciate it as a work of art.

Unfortunately, an understanding of it is difficult, even for the cultivated reader, without some special guidance. I am not one of those who think that appreciation of poetry comes alone through sensuous absorption in the impressions which it creates. I believe, on the contrary, that enjoyment of it is heightened as well as rectified by acquaintance with its literary antecedents and with the conditions that produced it. This is peculiarly the case with poetry so remote from modern life as Anglo-Saxon. But it is not easy to gain such special knowledge. A translation, however excellent, is not sufficient. Even for the practised mediævalist, *Beowulf* requires long and arduous study. The results of such study have hitherto been made very little available to the general reader. Admirable histories of early literature and excellent books of reference have often failed to do the poem justice, or even to state facts about it correctly. Many people, otherwise well informed about English literature, think of *Beowulf* as the crude expression of a barbaric age, not comprehending its beauty

and its artistry, its significance as an expression of the first great age of English letters and as a picture of European life in the early Middle Ages. The poem has seemed doomed to remain to a large extent the possession of scholars, a sealed book excepting to the initiated.

With this situation in mind, I undertook the present volume, about ten years ago. I have been constantly occupied with *Beowulf*, in teaching and investigation, for some twenty-five years, and I have published a considerable number of studies intended only for specialists. Yet I have always been allured by the prospect of writing a book for those interested in the poem as literature. I believe that this is quite as much needed at the present time as further detailed investigation of unsolved problems. It is far easier to write a book for scholars, buttressed with sapient and lengthy notes, than it is to present highly technical and disputed matters in readable fashion. But it is through such synthesis that research gains final justification.

My task has been greatly simplified by the appearance of *Beowulf, an Introduction to the Study of the Poem*, by Professor R. W. Chambers of the University of London, one of the most learned, exhaustive, and judicious contributions ever made to the study of early poetry. Disputed questions are analyzed, theories summarized, documents reprinted, and elaborate bibliographical apparatus

provided. Like an older warrior, Professor Chambers has offered complete equipment and sage advice to those about to make their maiden venture into the perilous lists of *Beowulf* criticism.

It would be worse than fruitless to attempt a second time what has already been accomplished with so much distinction, and a poor return for the honor which Professor Chambers has done me in his dedication. But the main object of my book is quite different. His *Introduction* is addressed primarily to the scholar and the student; in the phrase of a discriminating reviewer, it is "prolegomena for an expert." This volume, on the other hand, makes its appeal to those who wish to gain a sound knowledge of *Beowulf* so far as it may be done without an understanding of Anglo-Saxon, and to those who are just beginning a reading of the poem in that language. It is concerned with the fruits of research, rather than with the processes by which those fruits have been ripened and gathered. It presupposes no knowledge of the Middle Ages. It does take for granted, however, a willingness to read the epic itself with care, and to spend considerable time and thought in endeavoring to comprehend its peculiarities and the remote and unfamiliar civilization which it reflects.

Moreover, I have restricted myself, in the main, to a single avenue of approach. What, after all, is the greatest difficulty experienced by the modern

reader of *Beowulf*? It is, I think, — apart from the language, which is cared for by translation, — the lack of acquaintance with the great traditional stories which men of early days knew by heart; with the contents of those stories, the ways in which they were perpetuated from generation to generation, and the customs and ideals which informed them. My aim in the following pages, then, is to review the subject-matter of the poem, both the main plot and the chief subsidiary material, and to show how this appears to have been gradually combined into an epic, giving due attention to the social and political background. I have called the book *Beowulf and Epic Tradition*, but I have aimed, not at the separate treatment of a specialized subject, but at that information which the reader most needs.

The difficulties in writing this volume have been far greater than I anticipated. Many important questions are still unsettled, and the steering of a safe course between rival theories is always hazardous. My decisions will naturally not always command assent. But my general aim has been conservative: to utilize the results of the best and latest research without admitting doubtful or hypothetical conclusions. Outworn and discarded views have received scant attention, or none at all. Conjectures, however brilliant, which lack reasonable proof have been omitted. I have not hesitated to

repeat much that is familiar to every specialist, but this has often cost much labor in clearness of statement. A good deal of chapters IV, V, VI, and VII is based upon my own published researches, and chapter VIII reviews afresh the whole development of the material from its origins to its final epic form. I have tried to be as severe with myself as with others, and not to allow my own published conclusions a place unless they have stood the test of criticism. Moreover, I have refrained from advancing any new theories of my own. I have, of course, not traced the transmutations of epic narratives in detail; this would be of little interest save to the specialist, and would require far more space than the present volume affords. The temptation to illustrate by extracts from early literature has generally been resisted; the uninformed reader is not always enlightened by being confronted with unfamiliar material, and attention should be concentrated upon the poem itself. Quotations have been sparingly introduced, in order to save space, but frequent references to line-numbers have been added. I assume that the reader will always have the original or a translation at hand, and that what is said here will be subordinated to careful reading. I have used the second edition of the Wyatt-Chambers text (1920), indicating the places where I have departed from the decisions of those editors. The quantities of vowels

have not been marked, excepting in quotations or titles. Some information in regard to editions, translations, and the soundest and most helpful commentaries has been added. This bibliography might of course be indefinitely extended. The notes, which will be of service to the more advanced reader, consist of brief comments on points not fully developed in the body of the book, and references to special discussions elsewhere. It should be understood that these notes are merely suggestive, and that much which would be in place in a monograph has been omitted. Genealogical tables, and an outline of the whole poem, will be found in appendices.

Finally, I hope that this volume may be of use to advanced students, even if that is not its main object. The danger in technical investigation is that one gets to see details rather than the picture as a whole. Those engaged in research may gain something from a statement of ultimate results, if only by way of comparison with their own conclusions.

I am indebted to several friends. The late Professor William Henry Schofield first suggested that I write this book, and criticized a portion of an early draft of it. Dr. Henry Goddard Leach has given me information in regard to the *Saga of Samson the Fair*. I have been assisted in various ways by my colleagues, Professor Brander Matthews, Professor George C. D. Odell, and Professor Dino

Bigongiari, and especially by Professor George Philip Krapp and Professor Harry Morgan Ayres. I owe much to the unwearied interest and the illuminating suggestions of Professor George Lyman Kittredge. My greatest obligation, which cannot be stated in detail, is to the multitude of scholars whose patient labor has made such a book as this possible.

W. W. L.

*June, 1928*

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# BEOWULF



## I

## INTRODUCTION

SIR WILLIAM TEMPLE, in his essay, *Of Poetry*, expressed the opinion that “Gothick” verse “was of a raving or rambling sort of Wit or Invention, loose and flowing, with little Art or Confinement to any certain Measures or Rules,” though with “a sort of Gingle that pleased the ruder Ears of that People.” We may smile at this, and forgive Sir William, when we reflect how little his contemporaries understood such matters; but we ourselves sometimes underestimate the highly conscious and formal artistry of mediæval vernacular poetry. The conception of the earlier Middle Ages as a barbarous era, with learning dead, and literature moribund, was so long accepted that some vestiges of it have survived even to the present day. In the very beginning, then, we must agree to judge *Beowulf*, the first great poem in a vulgar tongue in the “Gothick” period, not as the improvisation of an untutored minstrel, but as a well-considered work of art, composed according to strict rules by a well-trained poet.<sup>1</sup>

Anglo-Saxon verse was, of course, as much confined by “measures and rules” as that of Dryden or of Pope, and it was deeply rooted in the tradi-

tions of professional singers, the main features of whose craft were shared by the poets of the other peoples of Germanic stock. The details of its metrical system are imperfectly understood; its rhetorical features are easier to grasp. Clearly, so far from being in any way primitive, it was over-elaborate, on its way to decadence. Variation and repetition were too freely and too mechanically employed; set epic phraseology too often took the place of inspiration. The art of the singer was coming to resemble that of a worker in mosaic, placing in new combinations pieces ready to his hand. "Love of style," says Dr. Ryder, in commenting on *The Little Clay Cart*, "slowly strangled originality and enterprise in Indian poets, and ultimately proved the death of Sanskrit literature."<sup>2</sup> A similar fate, aided by other causes, was in store for Anglo-Saxon. *Beowulf*, the finest extant example of this poetry, shows less exaggeration in rhetorical artifices, but enough to bear witness to their dangers. Although derived to a large extent from popular sources, as were the lays of the *Poetic Edda* or the lyrics of the troubadours, it is, like them, extremely conventional, the product of an *ars poetica* of settled principles and careful development.

Moreover, it is highly sophisticated and aristocratic, essentially a courtly epic. It was no wild outpouring of adventure for the ears of the vulgar, but an elegant entertainment for a royal circle.

The conjecture has been made, on the basis of its didactic quality, that it approaches a "mirror for princes," giving instruction in the virtues that should distinguish royalty.<sup>3</sup> This, I think, is a mistake; Anglo-Saxon poets, like those of Germanic stock generally,<sup>4</sup> were incurably hortatory; they looked upon the pointing of a moral as one of the best adornments of a tale. There can be no doubt, however, of the aristocratic temper of *Beowulf*. In the seventh and eighth centuries the English people were divided, as their ancestors on the Continent had been, into petty "kingdoms," sometimes coalescing into larger units, but chiefly occupied in fighting native tribes and quarrelling among themselves. The great common disaster of the Viking ravages had not yet come to solidify them into a nation. This essentially tribal society, like that of many a people in a much more primitive stage of culture, was highly formal. It was hedged about by rigid taboos and conventions. Its insistence upon etiquette was as great as that at the court of Queen Elizabeth; its conceptions of duty as rigid as those of the Puritans. Although the historical characters in the epic flourished some two hundred years earlier, they are represented according to the manners of the seventh or eighth century. It is really not a picture of the ruder life on the Continent, but of the more civilized courts in the north of England. The fundamental basis of the

social order was, however, the same. In his attitude toward all this the poet is not in the least naïve. His feeling for the historic past is, in its way, as sophisticated as that of Gibbon for the Roman Empire. His main plot was taken from old tales about demons and a dragon.<sup>1</sup> But these have assumed epic dignity by virtue of their setting; they do not appear incongruous with historical heroes. The whole must be taken, if the parallel is not too far pressed, in the same way as the poems of Chaucer more than six centuries later, as the work of a man familiar with courts, and writing for a courtly audience.

The subject-matter of the epic, like its metre and its rhetoric, was traditional, the stock-in-trade of the professional poet, which had been handed down from generation to generation. The unknown author was, to the best of our knowledge, a contemporary of the Venerable Bede, who died in 735. Some two centuries had passed since an age of warlike achievement which had crystallized into legend, into tales which had become, with the passage of time, the common heritage of singers and audiences alike. These had been brought to England, where they appear to have been perpetuated by oral transmission in the form of epic lays. Out of this pagan material the poet of *Beowulf* constructed his epic, and this remains the backbone of his work, along with the folk-tale plot.

But new influences in England were affecting him deeply, and giving to his poetry a new coloring. These influences, it is to be observed, were themselves in the direction of formal artistry, of literary models rather than of oral tradition, so that his poem is an even more conscious and cultured production than it would have been had it followed the fashions of earlier story-telling alone.

This change was, of course, the introduction of Christianity among the Anglo-Saxons, upon which followed a remarkable interest in letters. In the seventh century the Irish monks were active in the north, and their preaching was fortified by that of the celebrated mission of Augustine, which in the same century extended its efforts effectively from its headquarters in the south to the Anglian kingdoms in the north. The Irish monks were scholars as well as missionaries; their schools were famous, and they taught their converts the best that had remained of classical letters. The Roman churchmen, too, brought with them a knowledge of Latin and Greek, a love of books and learning, not only establishing ecclesiastical foundations noted for scholarship, but keeping closely in touch with the best that the Continent had to give. The result was that England came to lead the world in humane letters. When Charlemagne looked about for a scholar to direct his palace school and combat heresy, he chose, not a Continental scholar, but the

celebrated Alcuin, a product of the Cathedral school at York. It was not a day when barbaric verse, pure and simple, commanded such enthusiastic hearing as that touched with the spirit of the new learning. But the technique of pagan poetry survived, as the normal means of expression in the vernacular. The church naturally discouraged heathen traditions, and supplied its converts with themes drawn from Christian and classical letters. Tales of strange adventures and fierce contests in the dim past were too well loved to be lost, however, and *Beowulf* is the great example of how such tales continued, with such alterations as would make them acceptable to the Church. The most striking of these alterations, which we shall consider in a moment, was the avoidance of all references to heathen deities, and the envelopment of the whole in an atmosphere of Christian piety. How far the new acquaintance with classical literature affected the poet of *Beowulf* is more difficult to estimate with certainty. The verse-men of the seventh and eighth centuries who turned to Biblical and classical themes were influenced by the style of their models; it seems unlikely that the poet of *Beowulf* could have remained unaffected by the new learning which was all about him. Did he imitate the *Aeneid*, consciously or unconsciously, or are the resemblances between this and his work accidental? These are questions that must be dis-

cussed later.<sup>4</sup> The main point to keep in mind is that the natural tendency of the time was to add to pagan artistry a new element of sophistication from learned sources.

Had Christianity not come to Britain and controlled the activity of its poets, we might have had a *Beowulf* with a heathen mythology, like the lays of the *Poetic Edda*. The art of the Germanic professional poet, which we can study from the precepts of the *Prose Edda*, consisted not only in memorizing great traditional stories and controlling a variety of metres and rhetorical expressions, but in an intimate knowledge of the gods and goddesses, great and small. It is a blemish on the Anglo-Saxon epic that the newly learned Christian piety crowded this out, not only because of the incongruity of representing the wilder heroes of the Migration Period as swayed by the gentle precepts of the Church, but because this is on the whole so awkwardly done. The religion of the characters seems imposed upon them rather than natural to them. The poorest and weakest parts of the poem are to be found among the definitely Christian passages. The only thing that is naïve about the poem is its theology. Here is untried material, and a childlike attitude toward a new faith. Tradition had not yet taught the poet how to treat it with technical assurance. But, though ever present, the Christianity is all on the surface. The real vitality of the epic lies in its paganism.

It appears altogether probable that *Beowulf* was composed pen in hand, or written from the poet's dictation. Undoubtedly the traditions of the professional poet, as these had been handed down through the centuries, were largely concerned with verse unwritten and perpetuated orally. Improvisation was not an accomplishment but a requirement; the well-trained singer was expected to lift up his voice at short notice whenever he was requested to do so. All the indications seem to point to the transmission of historic and legendary material from the Continent to Britain in memory, in rhymed form. But our poet was living in a very different time from his predecessors. The new and convenient art of writing introduced by the Christian missionaries, and the constant study of written texts, would certainly have made it easy and natural to transfer composition in the vernacular to the written page. Such must have been the case with the Biblical paraphrases belonging roughly in the era of our poet, which, though associated with the name of the rustic Cædmon, are the work of different clerics, and with the legends and lives of saints versified according to the old rules of pagan poetry by Cynewulf and his contemporaries in the later eighth century. We do not know whether any Germanic poem of the epic amplitude of *Beowulf* existed before the introduction of Christianity. It is quite possible that none did exist, and

that the plan and general execution of the whole was suggested by Vergil or other classical models, — in short, that *Beowulf*, like the *Aeneid*, is a book-epic. Decision in regard to these matters is difficult; dogmatic statements are impossible. No one familiar with the ability of primitive peoples to compose and retain in memory long epic narratives will deny the possibility of this for Anglo-Saxon; but it does not seem probable for *Beowulf*, composed in the golden age of Anglo-Saxon learning, and stylistically far removed from communal verse.<sup>5</sup>

We first reach certainties with the tenth century, in which, for palaeographical reasons, the extant and unique manuscript of *Beowulf* may be placed. The usual “round date” given is the year 1000. The whole codex consists of two separate sections bound together; and our epic is only one of the pieces in the second section; it is preceded by a fragment of a life of St. Christopher, an account of the *Wonders of the East*, and a version of the *Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle*, all in prose, while a part of a metrical version of the apocryphal *Book of Judith* follows it. The three pieces preceding, and the first 1939 lines of the epic, are in the writing of one scribe, and the remainder of *Beowulf* and *Judith* in that of another. This shows us immediately, what we should infer for many other reasons, that the extant version is only a copy. The

language is, in the main, West Saxon, but the presence of many Anglian forms indicates that, like almost all extant Anglo-Saxon verse, the epic was originally composed in a northern dialect. The great poetical period of Anglo-Saxon letters, the eighth century, was rudely terminated by the Viking invasions; but the best productions of the north were preserved by being transcribed into the West Saxon dialect in the south, after Alfred and his successors had freed that part of the island from the mounting tide of Scandinavian occupancy. One likes to associate the copying of *Beowulf* with the brief revival of letters in the days of Dunstan and Æthelwold, when native culture was revived for a brief time before becoming completely submerged. The linguistic evidence in the manuscript is not sufficient to indicate the exact district or kingdom in which the poem was first composed. The varied dialectical forms may be due in part to the individual peculiarities of scribes. Some extreme southern — Kentish — forms are observable. There may, indeed, have been several copyings before the poem reached its present form in the extant manuscript. Evidence in regard to the original date of composition is equally unsatisfactory. Linguistic, grammatical, and metrical tests must be taken with great reserve, but so far as they go, they support the evidence of the style and treatment of the subject-matter in pointing to North-

umbria or Mercia in the late seventh or early eighth century.

It is to be noted that the epic is substantially complete; out of a total of 3182 lines only about a dozen are hopelessly damaged (2215-2220; 2227-2230; 3151-3155). The opening and closing lines, which in early manuscripts are often missing or imperfect, are in excellent shape. This is of course due to the fact that *Beowulf* is protected by the pieces preceding and following in the codex. The scribes were careless, and made many mistakes. Obvious errors abound; letters, words, and sometimes whole half-lines are missing. Corrections have occasionally been made, and letters freshened up, not always happily. Punctuation, spacing, syllabic arrangement, and the marking of vowel-length are all provokingly inconsistent. The whole is of course written as prose, for economy of space, but there is no difficulty in rearrangement in lines of alliterative verse. The division of the whole into an introduction and forty-three sections of unequal length, indicated in the manuscript by Roman numerals in the margin, is puzzling, since the arrangement is not always in accord with canto division as we understand it. An ingenious theory<sup>6</sup> has been advanced to account for this numbering, but the older explanation still seems most probable, that it really does represent a division into cantos, perhaps with some inaccuracies in copying. The

matter is of no great consequence; the divisions may well be merely the work of some scribe, and they may safely be neglected by the modern reader.

*Beowulf* was perhaps esteemed and recopied in the Anglo-Saxon period for quite other reasons than those for which we prize it to-day. The material with which it is associated in the codex may give us a hint of those reasons. The *Wonders of the East* and the *Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle* describe marvels fitly to be grouped with Grendel and his dam, with the dragon and water-monsters of *Beowulf*. Alexander was especially interested in informing his tutor Aristotle about strange beasts and dragons in the East. It may seem odd to think of *Beowulf* as having been valued for its information about natural history, but there would have been nothing strange about such an attitude of mind in the tenth century. The Church abhorred monsters, but lost no chances to learn more about them. Possibly, too, *Beowulf* may have seemed, to those who copied his adventures, like the hero of a pious tale or a saint's legend. The slaying of Grendel, an evil spirit descended from Cain, and of the dragon, gives him somewhat the character of St. George, whose dragon contests in Libya were so alluring to the English that they made him their patron saint. In the story of Judith, freeing her people from the menace of Holofernes, told in the

fragments following *Beowulf* in the codex, we may see a parallel to the exploits of Beowulf, freeing his own people from a dragon, and the Danes from their resident demons. Beowulf's piety, and the favor shown him by the Lord, are constantly stressed as in the typical saint's legend. Although the Christian veneer seems the least admirable part of the poem, from the literary point of view, it may, by a curious irony, have saved the whole from destruction, in days when many a bonfire of old manuscripts was lit for the faith.

An interesting autograph, "Lawrence Nowell," written at the top of the first page of the codex, shows that this must have belonged to the scholarly Dean of Litchfield, who died in 1576, the author of an Anglo-Saxon dictionary, and the writer of various studies on early literature. Nowell left no evidence, however, that he realized the value of his possession. The manuscript later passed into the hands of Sir Robert Cotton, the celebrated antiquary of the days of Queen Elizabeth. His library was a favorite resort of literary men; Ben Jonson was a frequent visitor, and Bacon gained from it much of the material for his *History of Henry the Seventh*. No stretch of probability is required to imagine Shakespeare looking curiously at the volume. Sir Robert kept his books duly lettered and numbered, in a series of cases surmounted by busts of Roman emperors, with Cleopatra and Faustina

on the distaff side; so the manuscript is still known, from the bust of the Emperor Vitellius on the book-case, as "Cotton Vitellius A xv." After the death of Sir Robert Cotton in 1631, his magnificent library was moved about London, first to Essex House in the Strand, then to Little Dean's Yard, Westminster, where, a hundred years later (1731), it was badly damaged by fire. Fortunately the *Beowulf* codex escaped with a scorching. On the foundation of the British Museum in 1753, it found at last a safe and permanent resting-place.

The late recognition of the importance of *Beowulf* as a piece of literature may have been due in part to its position in the codex, virtually buried in less important material. Carelessness and imperfect knowledge were also partly responsible. When the antiquary Humfry Wanley published a summary of the subject-matter, with a transcript of the opening lines, in the celebrated *Thesaurus* of Dr. Hickes, in 1705, he got things very wrong indeed. Neither Wanley nor Hickes seems to have had any idea of the importance of the poem. The honor of printing the first edition (1815) and of making the epic known to the world belongs to a Dane, Grim Thorkelin, who journeyed to England, copied the manuscript, and employed a transcriber to make a second copy. He thought mistakenly that *Beowulf* was a Danish poem which had been translated into English, and he took pride in the convic-

tion that he was restoring to Denmark (though he had himself been born in Iceland), after a lapse of more than a thousand years, a genuine native epic. Despite inaccuracies, his work was of great value. It made the poem accessible to scholars, and preserved a record of the manuscript at a time when it was in far better shape than it is to-day. With the work of the first English editor, Kemble (1833, 1835), the poem was fairly started on its modern career. Only through a series of happy accidents has it survived at all, which suggests that unhappy accidents may have destroyed much other early verse that would give us equal delight to-day.

It is convenient to call the man who composed the epic, essentially as we have it, the *Beowulf* poet. In using this term we shall not forget that additions and alterations may have been made in his work, in the course of later copyings and transference to another dialect, and that, in a sense, the multitude of men who shaped and reshaped, through succeeding generations, the old tales that he utilized, also have a claim to authorship. The immediate sources from which he drew have of course perished, but there can be no doubt, as already suggested, that he was only giving final form to extant narrative material. He was no more original in subject-matter than Shakespeare or Molière. Just how he worked, on the basis of current songs or lays, what form these had assumed,

and whether they were circulating in Britain in oral or written form, or both, cannot be determined. It seems clear, however, that such epic lays existed. The *Fight at Finnsburg*, which forms so interesting a supplement to *Beowulf*, appears to belong in that category, despite the fact that its beginning and end are missing. But the epic is no mere patchwork, nor is it possible to isolate older lays in it. Many critics of the later nineteenth century thought otherwise, following the prevailing theory that popular epics could by careful scrutiny be resolved into their component parts. The apparent success of this theory as applied to Homer and the *Nibelungenlied* led to its application to *Beowulf*, and to daring and positive results. In a modified form belief in the possibility of demonstrating multiple authorship has continued down to the present day. Such analyses often throw light on the structure of the poem, but their chief service has been to show its unity. The results reached by different scholars do not agree, nor do their "lays" square with what we know of early popular poetry. The fashion of the epic song is one thing; that of the leisurely and extended epic, another. Tests of language, style, and metre fail to show differences between parts of the poem supposedly from the hands of separate composers. Inconsistencies and repetitions are found in most long poems, and repetition, in particular, is an ingrained stylistic char-

acteristic of Anglo-Saxon verse. Sometimes the poet has even introduced varying and irreconcilable accounts of the same event, as in the descriptions of the burying of the dragon's treasure in the final adventure. But this does not mean that we can segregate two separate songs on the subject. The voice of Kyd sounds now and again from the lines of *Hamlet*, but no one can distinguish accurately the lines written by the elder dramatist. Much more weight is attached by modern critics to the individual plan and execution of the *Beowulf* poet, who subdued existing narrative material to a controlling artistic purpose of his own. The creation of any work of art defies exact analysis of the elements that compose it.<sup>7</sup>

The "plot" of the epic, stated briefly, reads like a wonder-tale. Beowulf, prince of the Geatas, puts an end to the ravages of the demon Grendel, who for twelve years has nightly haunted the hall of Hrothgar, king of Denmark, killing and eating Hrothgar's warriors. In a second combat, Beowulf kills the demon's dam in her abode beneath the waters. In his old age, he fights against a dragon that has attacked his people, and dies in delivering them from the scourge. A more elaborate outline of the epic quickly assumes a very different character, however; it becomes historical and realistic, with long episodes, shorter digressions, passing allusions to legend, scenes of court

life, and genealogizing. The opening passage sets the keynote; first of all, instead of a description of the demon, or of the hero, or even of the haunted hall, the ancestors of the Danish monarchs are enumerated, with particular emphasis upon the coming and the funeral of Scyld, the founder of the Scylding line. Or, for another test, observe the way that the dragon episode is told, with the accounts of how men of early days first gathered the hoard, and the long digressions setting forth, in detailed fashion, the feuds of Geatas and Swedes through three generations. Meanwhile, as so often, the main action of the poem waits, cap in hand, until the historical reminiscences are over.

A sharp separation of these two main currents of interest, the supernatural and the realistic, which naturally suggests itself, and which has long been traditional, is justified by all we can learn of the actual growth of the epic. By one of the accidents of story-telling, and long before the composition of our poem, a Jack-and-the-Beanstalk hero, Beowulf, the "bee-wolf" (that is, "bear"), — a boy with an animal strain in his parentage or rearing, like so many early champions, — was elevated, with his double exploit of killing two trolls, one in a hall and the other under water (a narrative which forms the substance of a widespread folk-tale), into a circle of dignified historical personages. Either before or after this combination, he was also made a dragon-

slayer. Both popular tale and historical setting retained their individuality. Many traces survive of the hero's primitive character, after he has been made over into a Germanic prince. Supernatural strength in wrestling and swimming, and supernatural ability to exist under water, are still his own. The story of his slothful and ignominious boyhood, known to folklorists as "the male Cinderella" theme, was not discarded. The bright and beautiful prince "was for a long time in no estimation, the warriors of the Geatas did not account him good for anything, nor was the lord of the Wederas minded to assign him an honorable place on the mead-bench; they were convinced that he was sluggish, an unwarlike ætheling" (2183-2188). On the other hand, the historical material is no mere background. It is vital to the story, and must have been so in earlier versions of more popular character. It lends to the rather childish contests with monsters a plausibility not found in folktales, and provides an interest which, if secondary, is hardly less absorbing than the main plot. In the final epic version the champion of fireside yarns has become a model hero, versed in etiquette, eloquent in speech, a wise and temperate ruler. It increases the dignity of the demons and the dragon that so admirable a prince should condescend to slay them. The amalgamation of folk-tale and historical tradition, then, while not absolutely complete, has pro-

duced a species of narrative distinct from either, but possessing, in large degree, the charm of both.<sup>8</sup>

All this is familiar enough, yet we are in danger of underestimating the importance of the historical elements, and of misconceiving the peculiar nature of their appeal. We may grant freely that the backbone of the epic is the supernatural plot. Men of Anglo-Saxon blood have always loved good contests and good sportsmanship. Beowulf fights fair in long and dangerous struggles, carefully described, against demon adversaries, who are not made too definite. The poet is wise enough to rely upon imagination to do its work, though he kindles imagination by occasional descriptions,—the uncanny abode of the Grendel tribe, in the dark forest, where hoar-frosted trees overshadow stagnant waters; the grave mound filled with antique treasures, where the dragon watches on the windy heights. There is plenty of stirring action, the proper business of epic. But the audience obviously waited with no less eagerness for reminiscences of old historic tradition. Almost every page of *Beowulf* gives evidence of how completely this filled their minds. The poet had only to suggest, in order to evoke vivid recollections. He could take for granted acquaintance with long and complicated feuds, touching only upon such moments as seemed to him effective; or he could trace, with fresh detail, a long sequence of events which had

crystallized into heroic story. His digressions often seem to us to clog the action, and distract attention from it. But there was little suspense in the plot; the story was familiar, what was important was detail. And no part of this detail, in days when there were few ways of learning about the past, was more absorbing than history, or what passed for history. Tastes have changed since then. One sometimes wonders at the fascination exercised by long genealogies. In the Icelandic sagas the luxuriant family trees, with every bough and twig duly pictured forth, seem to us to darken high adventure with their spreading branches. The same is true of Irish and Welsh. As for *Beowulf*, a modern story-teller would hardly have thought it worth while to give the entire royal lines of both the sovereigns at whose courts the action takes place. But the earlier habit of mind is of great significance. If we are to read the epic as it was meant to be understood, we must endeavor to recapture, so far as we may, its intense interest in early heroic tradition, and to gain familiarity with its complexities.

The historical portion of *Beowulf* is remarkable for its fidelity to fact. With all its elaborations, it preserves a certain restraint. This is particularly striking when it is compared with later versions of the same material. Contrast, for example, its account of the feuds of Danes and Heathobards with

the same events in the pages of *Saxo Grammaticus*, five centuries later. Although *Beowulf* stresses the personal elements, — the ill-starred love of the Danish princess and the Heathobard prince, the vengeance slumbering in the heart of a Heathobard warrior for a sire once killed by the Danes, — it obviously presents with some clearness the earlier outlines of the tale. The long speech of the old fighter who kindles the feud anew (2047–2056) is of course pure fiction, but it enriches the tragedy, it does not disturb it. How different is the situation in the pages of the Danish monk! The very foundations of the story are shattered — the Heathobards, traditional enemies of the Danes, have themselves become Danish. So in Icelandic, although the story develops along other lines. The further events recede into the past, of course, the greater the departure from fact. But this is not all; there is in *Beowulf* a sobriety of temper in dealing with history which is quite its own. The point of view of the poet is, in general, as impartial as that of a modern historian. He has a hero, and his work involves glorification of that hero and the hero's people, but he gives due tribute to the greatness of other folk. This was the usual procedure of a minstrel of the Heroic Age, who knew of all notable men about the circle of the seas. Since the first two adventures lie at the court of the Danes, it is natural that their greatness and their traditions should

occupy the earlier portion of the poem. The episodes deal chiefly with them; the longest digression, the tale of Finnsburg, is a story of Danish heroism. But as soon as the second adventure is over, and Beowulf and his men sail back to their native land, the Danes are quite forgotten, and the new setting brings up the richest reminiscences of the Geatas and the Swedes. Meanwhile, throughout the entire epic, the poet has not forgotten other great heroes and peoples than those with whom he is directly concerned; they might be the subjects for more long tales for winter evenings, did time but serve.

Folk-tale and history are so closely interwoven, however, that we must be constantly on the alert for distortion of fact. And *Beowulf* is, after all, a story, in which the imaginative effect is of supreme importance. Fortunately, a certain amount of documentary evidence is available by which the veracity of the poem may be tested, and it is frequently possible, where this evidence does not exist, to make fairly safe guesses as to what is elaboration of actual occurrences, and what is invention pure and simple. Thus the death of Hygelac, the sovereign of Beowulf, at the hands of the Franks and their allies, is confirmed by Frankish historians, and the accession of Hygelac's son, Heardred, has antecedent probability in its favor. But the connection of Beowulf with the noble house of the Wægmundingas and his activity as

king of the Geatas is probably wholly fictitious, not merely because of his folk-tale origin, but also because of the lack of events which the poet can remember, too few for the long reign of so illustrious a king. A stout fighter would surely not have played a passive rôle in the long contests with the Swedes, the hereditary foes of his people. In dealing with the realistic background, then, it is frequently wisest to take refuge in the phrase "historical or legendary." Early poetry was not concerned to separate fact from fiction. Complete accuracy of historical detail would not increase the realism or the charm of the picture of early Germanic life in *Beowulf*. The story-teller betters things for the business of poetry, and his canvas is veracious in a different way,—in its fidelity to the spirit of the age, and to manners and customs, forms of government and conceptions of duty, as they actually existed.

Moreover, if the poet was impartial in his outlook, he was in no wise cold-blooded; he felt with extraordinary poignancy the underlying tragedy of the events which he was recording. When history is retold as epic, the human element becomes all-important. Political development means little; passion and emotion, much. Events of great ultimate historical significance are forgotten, and details, by their peculiar appeal to the imagination, become the springs of action. The further actual

occurrences recede into the past, the more marked is the tendency to motivate them in terms of human emotion. This dramatic element in the historic background is of great consequence for the artistic effect of the epic. Royal greatness is but the prelude to tragedy; sufferings more poignant than those inflicted by demons arise from ambition and greed. An atmosphere of impending fate envelops the courts of the Northland, brilliant though they be. The poet constantly glances into the future, emphasizing the tragic irony of human life, in particular the life of those upon whose brows a crown is set. But, as is his habit, he suggests rather than describes. Since the fortunes of his heroes and heroines are already well known, he indulges in no long explanations. A word or two evokes vivid memories; a phrase strikes the heart of tragedy. Against the main themes of the epic there run, contrapuntally, minor themes, and the effect is missed, as in an elaborate piece of polyphonic music, when the attention is centred wholly upon the outstanding melodies. To be specific, the adventures with Grendel and his dam are the main theme of the first part of the epic; and the tragedies of the Danish house of the Scyldings, the chief of the secondary themes. In the latter part of the poem, the main secondary theme is the long tragic feud of the Geatas and Swedes, set against the contest of Beowulf with a fire-spewing dragon. Allusion and reminis-

cence, leading themes and minor themes, are interwoven with bewildering variety. This literary method presents great difficulties to the modern reader. Subtle and elusive intimations are effective only for him who fully understands their significance.

Next to an acquaintance with heroic story, a comprehension of early social conventions is necessary to an intelligent reading of the poem. What were the warrior's obligations to his king and to his kinsmen? These were defined with the utmost strictness, and were not lightly to be transgressed. Highly organized rules of conduct, as has already been observed, often exist in a simple and even primitive community. The great social principles of the Migration Period were, in the England of Bede, after the lapse of some two centuries, still the governing force in the Anglo-Saxon state. Upon these the whole motivation of the poem depends. Their main outlines are easy to grasp, partly because of their essential simplicity, and partly because of their complete unlikeness to the social conventions of modern times. They undergo no essential modifications in being turned to the uses of poetry. The clash of conflicting duties with each other, and with the elemental passions of love and hatred and ambition, supplies the poet with his richest themes. Tribal law and tribal custom are the rocks against which the lives of men and

women are shattered, like surf on a storm-bound shore. We can as little understand the tragic elements in *Beowulf* without comprehending the social laws underlying them as we can read aright the *Oedipus Rex* or the *Electra* without knowing the Greek ideas of destiny and fate.

In a word, then, "he who would bring back the wealth of the Indies must take out the wealth of the Indies." He who would understand truly the artistic effect of *Beowulf* must study the pageant of Germanic heroic life, and the conventions which governed it. The chapters that follow are designed to make this clear.

First of all, it is necessary to comprehend the story and structure of the poem, and the family relationships of the principal personages. A reading of the text or of a translation will be assisted by an outline of the action, and by genealogical tables (Appendix A and Appendix B). Some idea should meanwhile be gained of the great peoples in the circle of heroic story, and of their common social ideals and social organization (chapter II). This is concretely and vividly illustrated by detailed analysis of the tragic histories of the two great royal houses against which the main action of the epic is projected (chapter III). Realistic historical material furnishing the subject-matter of a highly dramatic tale is provided by the *Finnsburg Fragment* and *Episode* (chapter IV). In sharp

contrast stand the supernatural narratives of the epic. An introductory study of the imaginative processes that underlie such narratives will deal with the figures of Scyld and Breca (chapter V). This will lead to consideration of the supernatural adventures of the hero with Grendel and Grendel's dam (chapter VI), and with the dragon (chapter VII). Finally, the whole history of the epic material will be reviewed, so far as it is possible to follow it, from the beginning, and the circumstances of the composition of the present poem in England will be discussed (chapter VIII). Throughout the whole book the chief emphasis will be laid upon the different forms and permutations of epic tradition.

## II

### PEOPLES AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

THE classification of the peoples mentioned in *Beowulf* according to their proper geographical and linguistic relationships forms a sound basis for the comprehension of the background of the story; yet such a classification presents many difficulties, even with all the resources of modern investigation at command. Our knowledge of the sixth century is imperfect; the most careful sifting of the available evidence yields incomplete results. Moreover, it was an era of confusion and transition. Political boundaries were shifting and ill defined, as was naturally the case with peoples in a migratory stage. And even if an exact reconstruction of historical conditions were possible, it would, of course, not be in harmony with the epic. Imagination has modified fact; history has become poetry. We have to reckon, too, with the ignorance of the poet, which critics do not always take sufficiently into consideration. How could any man in northern England in the seventh or in the eighth century have accurate knowledge of political and geographical conditions on the Continent, particularly in the outlying regions of the north, some two cen-

turies earlier? Such knowledge as he had must have reached him through oral tradition in the main, — the least safe and constant of guides.

In all probability the *Beowulf* poet had no clear idea of the relative positions of the tribes in his tale, though he could distinguish these tribes clearly and name eminent rulers and heroes identified with them. His chief business was to recall and to elaborate their epic traditions. Geography in the earlier Middle Ages was a rudimentary affair. Directions were reckoned chiefly by east and west, rather than by north and south. Epic descriptions of such places as can be identified rarely agree with the actual features of the landscape. For example, the chief city of the Danes, where the hall Heorot stood, has generally been identified with the ancient Lethra on the island of Zealand, now the small village Leire, near Roskilde.<sup>1</sup> But the traveller who visits this quiet hamlet, with its swampy meadows pierced by arms of the sea, will find little to recall the rugged landscape in *Beowulf*, — the beetling cliffs on which the coast guard watches, or the high, rocky forest land, where the mountain stream breaks into a pool beneath. The reason is simple. The domains of Hrothgar were pictured in the epic by a man who knew the sea-cliffs of northern England, but he was, as we shall see, telling a tale of waterfall-trolls, which had derived its characteristic scenery from Norway. He probably had

no idea at all what mountainous country or the coast of Denmark really looked like. Similarly, efforts to show, on the basis of descriptions in the epic, that the residence of King Hygelac of the Geatas was located near modern Göteborg in Sweden are totally unconvincing.<sup>2</sup> To argue that this must have been near rocky land because the dragon lived on a cliff near the sea, or because a beacon was erected on a headland in memory of the hero, is to confuse romance with reality. A safer guide to geography is the evidence of place-names. On this basis it seems fairly safe to locate Hrothgar's residence at Leire (Lethra) in Zealand, though the identification has been doubted. Efforts to determine the site of the hall Heorot are fruitless. The exact position is, indeed, of no special consequence for an understanding of the epic. It must also be remembered that place-names are sometimes used with seeming definiteness in obviously fictitious parts of the poem. Beowulf, an imaginary person, swimming with Breca, an imaginary prince of an imaginary people, the Brondingas, lands among the Finns, while Breca comes to land among the Heatho-Ræmas. Had the poet any clear notion of the location of these peoples? It is in the highest degree doubtful. The geography of a supernatural feat of endurance in swimming need not be exact. But the poet's instinct was correct; he knew enough to appear to be precise and matter-of-fact.

The aid that sober realistic detail gives to a marvellous story was not discovered by Defoe.

A great people like the Danes consisted of an amalgamation of many individual tribes, recognizing one king as their leader. Their wide distribution is emphasized by calling them East-Danes, West-Danes, South-Danes, and North-Danes, each term standing by metonymy for the people as a whole. Similarly, the poet refers within eight lines (2913-2921) to the armed forces that opposed Hygelac in the Low Countries as Frisians, Hugas, Hetware, and Merewioingas (Merovingians). When we are told that Hygelac attacked the Hugas (a poetic appellation for the Franks) and was defeated by the Hetware, we are not to take either statement with entire literalness; each name does duty for the entire combined force. Again, poetic terms give color and variety; the Danes are not only Scyldingas (shield-men), but Ar-Scyldingas (Honor-Scyldings), Sige-Scyldingas (Victorious Scyldings), Here-Scyldingas (Army Scyldings). Such variants served another useful purpose: they assisted in the composition of alliterative verse. The metre required at least one alliteration, linking the two half-lines of verse, and two alliterating stressed syllables were very common in the first half-line. The choice of words was thus considerably restricted, and it was convenient, if not necessary, to have poetic variants, beginning with

different consonants or with a vowel, to use in referring to a people who, like the Danes, must of necessity be frequently mentioned. We must be careful not to draw conclusions in regard to ethnography from the conventions and necessities of poetic style.

The epic is concerned mainly with two great Scandinavian peoples, and most, though not all, of the episodic material deals with Scandinavian heroes and tribes. The historic setting is well confined to the sixth century; only rarely is reference made to events lying outside that period. This was near the end of the era known as the Age of the Great Migrations, a term which may be somewhat misleading. There were, indeed, through the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries, many conflicts for the possession of territory, and frequent marches and resettlements. But the peoples were not constantly on the move; their existence was not nomadic. The occasional long journeys were brief as compared with the periods of colonization. For many years before the Age of the Migrations began, the "barbarian" peoples had manifested symptoms of the great awakening which was later to make them supreme in Europe; but the actual beginning of the movement is rightly reckoned from the clash between the Romans and the Goths in the fourth century, in consequence of the pressure of the Huns from the north and east. A faint and much-

altered reminiscence of this early time appears in *Beowulf* (1201), in the reference to Ermanric, king of the East-Goths, who committed suicide about 375 at the approach of the Huns, but who was remembered in epic story as a cruel tyrant. A fine example of the complete transformation of history by imagination is the pathetic legend, best read in Icelandic sources, which grew up about him: the love of his son Randver for the lovely Swanhild, whom Randver had to escort as a bride for his own father,—a love recalling that of Tristram for Isolt, the wife of his uncle Mark.<sup>3</sup> The terrible punishment which followed, according to the story, was long a favorite theme of singers. The poet of *Beowulf* apparently remembered the death of Randver on the gallows (2444 ff.), and he mentions Ermanric by name (1201), though he makes no mention of the bright-eyed Swanhild, trampled to death beneath the hoofs of wild horses.

The general outlines of the migrations of the Vandals, the Goths, the Franks, and the Anglo-Saxons, in the fifth and sixth centuries, may be traced with some clearness, but relatively little is known of the Scandinavians at this time. Being so far away from contact with Rome, they probably remained more static, though inter-tribal warfare obviously caused occasional redistribution of territory. The true Migration Period of the Scandinavians belongs in the so-called Viking Age,

which, whatever its limits, did not begin until long after *Beowulf* was composed.

The term "Germanic" has been so universally adopted for that subdivision of the great Aryan or Indo-European family of languages with which we are here concerned that no other term can conveniently be substituted for it. Yet it requires some explanation; it appears to emphasize unduly the importance of the ancestry of those German scholars who gave the word its currency. The Germanic peoples were of course in no way particularly identified with the territory covered by modern Germany; they stretched from southern Russia, where the Goths were settled in the fourth century, when they first came to grips with Roman power, to Iceland, which was settled mainly by Norwegians in the ninth century. The usual subdivisions are: North-Germanic, comprising the Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, and Icelanders; West-Germanic, mainly English (Anglo-Saxon), Dutch, and German; East-Germanic, Goths, Vandals, and Burgundians. These subdivisions have been established rather on the basis of language than of geographical location, yet, roughly speaking, the results of the two classifications coincide.

The Danes come first to notice about 500; before that time nothing is known of them. It would appear that they conquered and absorbed the Heruli, a people frequently mentioned by Roman historians,

and it has been suggested that the legends of their great Scylding dynasty are really, in historic basis, Herulian. Their relations with neighboring tribes, as the Heathobards and the Frisians, are obscure and perplexing. We shall have occasion later to notice their feuds with these tribes, as reflected in *Beowulf*, but heroic story cannot be relied upon to guide us safely to historical relationships.<sup>4</sup> How far the boundaries of the Danes extended in the sixth century cannot be determined with certainty. The centre of their power appears to have been the island of Zealand, as in modern Denmark. Scandia (modern Skåne), the southern end of the great northern peninsula, was included in the kingdom, and the terms "Scede-land" and "Sceden-ig" appear to have been used by metonymy for the whole Danish realm. Certainly we are not to conceive of the Danes as forming one unified "nation," but, as already suggested, as a collection of tribes, each with its own prince, rendering homage to a sovereign whose chief function was to assume leadership in time of war. These tribes must have felt a certain solidarity, however, from common speech and customs, and they may well have recognized the practical benefits of union in days of violence and change. They were obviously no mean folk, though the epic glorification of them must not be taken too literally.

The relations between Danes and Angles are interesting. The Danes clearly occupied, to a considerable extent, the lands left vacant by the Angles when the latter migrated to Britain. They particularly venerated the old deity or hero, Ing, whose name appears in the term "Ingævones," that division of the Germanic peoples who dwelt, according to Tacitus, "nearest to the sea." The Angles are mentioned by Tacitus as belonging to the Ingævones, and there is some evidence that they shared early religious cults with the Danes. The Anglo-Saxon kings included Scyld (Skjold), the eponymous ancestor of the Danish Scylding dynasty, and other Danish figures, in their royal genealogies. It has even been conjectured that the Anglian part of the English stock was of common blood with the Danes. If the Angles in their new homes in Britain felt a close kinship with the Danes, they might all the more readily listen to tales of Danish kings. But the praises of the Danish dynasty, and the intense interest in their fortunes which *Beowulf* displays, are sufficiently explained by the impartial enthusiasm of the poet for great figures of heroic story. In early days historic legend often found its warmest welcome, and its most brilliant transformations, in lands far from its own home.<sup>5</sup>

The Geatas, the people of Beowulf, claim equal attention. Unfortunately, little is known of them.

They are particularly prominent in the later part of the epic, through the detailed accounts of their prolonged hostilities with the Swedes. The best critical opinion places the Geatas in what is now Sweden, south of Lakes Wener and Wetter, and locates the "Swedes" of the poem to the north of them. The identification of the Geatas with the Jutes of Jutland, which rests upon arguments too elaborate to be discussed here, does not appear convincing.<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that words like *sæ* and *heafō* (2394, 2477), used in describing the waters separating Geatas and Swedes, need not necessarily denote the ocean. Such terms are very loosely used in the epic, partly in consequence of the demands of alliteration. They may well refer to the great Swedish lakes. Indeed, one late Swedish source describes a battle between the two peoples as having been fought on Lake Wener, on the ice. Such reminiscences of actual combats are far more trustworthy evidence than descriptions connected with fictitious portions of the epic. The capital of Hygelac may even have been near the southern shore of one of the great lakes, where defence against northern enemies could be quickly undertaken. The Geatas (Gautar) are placed by Procopius, writing in the middle of the sixth century, in Scandia, and appear to have been a powerful people; but it seems probable that not long after the death of Hygelac they were defeated by the

Swedes, and absorbed by them. Dire forebodings of this misfortune are heard near the close of the epic. The vanished glories of this people gave to the exploits of their heroes, and to their own checkered fortunes, a melancholy fascination. We shall have occasion later to observe how deeply this affected the Anglo-Saxon poet.

The Norwegians do not appear in *Beowulf*, and the Icelanders, chiefly men of Norwegian stock, did not settle on their barren island until the second half of the ninth century, more than one hundred years after the composition of the poem. Nor do the eastern group of the Germanic peoples, the Goths, Vandals, and Burgundians, require notice here. The fourth-century translation of the Bible into Gothic by Ulfila is a precious document for the student of language, but none of the fine old legends which show faintly beneath the Latin of the chronicles of the Goths has survived in the Gothic tongue. This is a great pity, since Gothic story deeply affected later epic. Nor is anything extant of vernacular Burgundian tradition, which played so large a part in the formation of the Sigurd-Siegfried material. Traces of Vandal story are wholly absent in the Germanic dialects.

Peoples and sovereigns of the West-Germanic branch are of some consequence in a study of *Beowulf*, though these lie outside the main concerns of the story. A very considerable settlement of

Saxons remained in the old homes on the Continent after the migration to Britain, and maintained lively relations with their kinsmen in England. Valuable evidence in regard to Germanic conditions is afforded by the Old Saxon epic, *Heliand*. Though treating of the life of Christ, and composed a century or more after *Beowulf*, it presents pagan poetic technique and pagan social institutions practically unchanged. Similarly, the primitive conceptions of the relations between retainers and over-lord appear in the fine passage in the Cædmonian *Genesis* translated from the Old Saxon. No similar Continental survivals of Old Anglian remain. The Angles, who had dwelt to the north of the Saxons, in the narrow part of the Jutic peninsula and the islands to the east, must nearly all have migrated to Britain. Bede says that their land "which is called Angulus . . . is said to have remained uninhabited from that time to the present day." This is perhaps exaggerated, but there can be little doubt that such of the Angles as remained were soon absorbed by neighboring tribes. The Jutes, who probably dwelt to the north, in the point of the peninsula, were apparently racially less akin to either Angles or Saxons than these were to each other. It is possible that some of the Frisians took part in the conquest of Britain. They were an important people in early times; their homes along the coast of modern Holland and

northwestern Germany, about the mouth of the Ems, gave great opportunities for trading and raiding. But they early disappeared from the theatre of European affairs, absorbed by their powerful neighbors, the Franks. In the time of Charlemagne they no longer had an independent existence. The most important of all the episodes in *Beowulf*, the tale of Finnsburg, which reflects Danish-Frisian feuds, mentions a tribe subordinate to the Frisians, the Eotens, probably to be identified with the Jutes, and, as already suggested, used by metonymy for the group of peoples opposed to the Danes in the story. *Beowulf* has nothing at all to say of the Saxons, and refers to the Angles only in a single passage, which may be interpolated (1925-1962).<sup>7</sup> Does this indicate connection of the poem with an Anglian court in the north of England? This will be discussed in the closing chapter; for the moment we may note that the tale of Thryth, the shrewish queen of the old Anglian king Offa, who is remembered in *Widsith* as a stout fighter on the Continent, is of high interest as preserving recollections of old traditions overseas, and of early popular story.

It has sometimes been asserted that the Anglo-Saxons did not possess a rich fund of native stories, since traces of these in early English literature are few and unimportant, and since the *Beowulf* poet, writing in English for English people, incorpo-

rated so little native tradition into his poem. But that poems and tales on native subjects are not extant does not prove that such never existed, and *Beowulf*, written at a time when the English had not developed a national consciousness, and were deeply interested in the deeds of other peoples, professedly takes as its theme Danish and Geatish heroes, and could bring in native material only episodically. A somewhat more convincing argument is the absence of Anglo-Saxon traditions from Scandinavian story-telling. The Scandinavians, like the Anglo-Saxons, were very deeply interested in the deeds of foreigners. Their greatest tale, the Volsung-Nibelung narrative, is based mainly on materials from other lands. But in all the wealth of epic material in Old Norse there is little about heroes of Anglian or Saxon stock. This silence is not proof that such warriors were not remembered abroad, but it seems to indicate that they attained no wide celebrity in the noble company of Germanic champions.

An excellent idea of the heroic world of the *Beowulf* poet and of his audience may be gained from the little Anglo-Saxon poem, only a hundred and forty-three lines long, known as *Widsith*, "the Far-Wanderer."<sup>8</sup> This should beyond question be read by every student of *Beowulf*. It consists mainly of an enumeration of the princes and peoples whom a minstrel, speaking in the first

person, asserts that he has visited. But it is all fiction; Widsith and his travels are quite imaginary. No human being could possibly have seen Ermanric, who died in 375, and Alboin, king of the Lombards, who flourished in the latter half of the sixth century. "Such pleasant deceptions are common in early story. So Taliesin, "primary chief bard to Elphin" in the Welsh *Mabinogion*, informs us that he was present at the Fall of Lucifer, the campaigns of Alexander the Great, the sailing of the Ark of Noah, and the nativity of Christ. But the fictitious setting of the Anglo-Saxon poem serves a useful purpose: what might otherwise be a bald collocation of names gains vividness and interest through the assurance that a singer personally visited them in his wanderings.

*Widsith*, in its present form, is a mosaic of "information-verses" dating from different periods. A part of it, a mnemonic jingle beginning

Attila ruled the Huns, Ermanric the Goths,  
Becca the Banings, the Burgundians Gifica,

— of no greater literary merit than "thirty days hath September," — is perhaps the earliest Anglo-Saxon verse extant. Other passages give priceless glimpses of the Migration Period, illuminated by flashes of genuine poetry, supplementing other epic tradition. The pretty picture of Widsith celebrating the queen of Ermanric, Ealhhild, in song, in company with his brother minstrel, Scilling,

though fictitious, is no doubt true to early custom. How far the piece is from a genuine autobiographical account of the journey of a Germanic minstrel to the Gothic or Lombard court is shown by its geography, which, as Professor Chambers has pointed out, is "such as might have been made by a gleeman who drew his lore from the traditions of the ancient Angel. . . . Out of thirty-one tribes and places which we can identify all but two are connected with either the North Sea or the Baltic: and these two exceptions are not far remote."<sup>9</sup> The poem thus becomes of great importance in supplementing and confirming statements in *Beowulf*. Possibly the poet of *Beowulf* may have known a part or parts of *Widsith*. The little framework which encloses the piece — the lines at the beginning introducing the minstrel, and those at the end glorifying his profession — is late, probably of the eighth century, and perhaps not far from the time of the composition of *Beowulf*. The whole, though a patchwork, and though archaic and stiff in places, has a charm and dignity which are quite its own.

The pleasant picture afforded by the travels of the fictitious Widsith may well give a somewhat rose-colored view of tribal relationships, although even here strife looms up darkly in the background. The natural attitude toward neighbors, in those wild days, was one of hostility and suspicion, of

aggression to extend territory, and defence to protect it. War was the chief business of life. In *Beowulf* the underlying cause of international complications is unsettled and long-standing feud, reaching far into the past. Danes are arrayed against Heathobards and Frisians, Geatas against Swedes and Franks. Similar conditions existed in the poet's own day, in the rivalries of Bernicia, Deira, and Mercia. The friendly relations between Geatas and Danes, so much stressed in the epic, probably rest rather on fiction than on fact. *Beowulf* is moved to help Hrothgar by desire for glory in troll-killing, and in return for the assistance given to his father, Ecgtheow, by the Danish king, when Ecgtheow had been outlawed for slaying. There may be an actual basis for this episode (459-472), but not for the paternity of the folk-tale hero. And there is a clear indication (1857-1858) that even Geatas and Danes were once at war with each other. Violence and feud within the group of associated tribes, or within a tribe itself, were analogous in many ways to the quarrels between openly hostile neighboring peoples. Injury, retaliation, revenge for the retaliation or a settlement by payment of money,—such was the process whether within a kingdom or between kingdoms. Warfare between two peoples was often made vivid by being conceived as the individual hostility of their sovereigns, just as in later times.<sup>10</sup>

Authorities differ widely in regard to the organization of the early Germanic state,<sup>11</sup> and the relative importance of the different forms of allegiance. The earlier critics were inclined to draw conclusions rather from Roman writers and from the legal codes of Continental peoples than from traditions preserved in Anglo-Saxon, Old Saxon, and Scandinavian vernacular literature. The dangers of generalizing from the *Germania* of Tacitus, a work strongly colored by the writer's desire to point a moral to decadent Rome, have long been recognized. Professor Gummere put it well in saying that "our typical German, like Plato's ideal horse, is a very difficult matter to define and draw; and, indeed, he has been drawn in every shade from absolute savagery to a graceful and accomplished person, as unlimited in courtesy and intellect as in muscular development, who 'cultive ses jardins, les vertus, et les arts.'"<sup>12</sup> The *Beowulf* poet clearly felt the antiquity of the tales he retold, but he probably did not himself try to archaize in his representation of manners and customs, though he must have recognized that tradition gave a picture different from that of his own times. Mediæval writers were, of course, prone to show antiquity in contemporary guise. We may, I think, safely assume that the fundamental conceptions of society and politics in *Beowulf* were those of Anglo-Saxon England of the seventh century.

The political unit of the Germanic state in the sixth and seventh centuries was the kingdom. This term often means no more than "tribal group"; it must not be too magnificently conceived, any more than "town," which was generally nothing more than a collection of dwellings surrounding a central hall, and protected by a stockade. A natural result of constant warfare was the gradual amalgamation of smaller kingdoms into more powerful groups, with the warriors of one commanding tribe as leaders. The kingdom of Hrothgar the Dane was such a loose organization of scattered peoples. His ancestors had been victorious in war, and had forced surrounding peoples to pay tribute. By the sixth century this process of amalgamation had gone quite far, but the resulting associations of peoples were very far from being "nations," in the modern sense of the word. Epic poetry exaggerates their brilliance and solidity. The ties that bound them were quite easily broken, fresh combinations were readily made, and the settled central organization of later days was lacking. When there was no firm national structure there could be no patriotism.

The king was not a mere figurehead; he was leader in war and the administration of justice, and his office involved religious functions, the precise nature of which is not clear. It was the greatest of misfortunes for a people to lack a sovereign, as did the Danes before the coming of Scyld (14-16).

The royal power was hereditary, though succession might be violated in consequence of the weakness or wickedness of the legitimate heir. The leading chiefs could not allow the safety of the kingdom to be jeopardized, in days when might generally made right, by allowing an incompetent man to wear the crown. A late reflection of the importance of this elective power in Scandinavia appears in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: Claudius "popped in" between the election and Hamlet's natural hope and expectation that he would wear the crown on his father's death. Though the king had religious duties, there was no sanctity about his person which forbade getting rid of him if he misbehaved himself, as did Heremod in *Beowulf* (901 ff.). At the same time, disturbance of the normal succession through personal ambition was, even in these early days, regarded as dangerous, as sowing the seeds of future trouble. There can be little doubt that the picture of the usurpations in the house of Hrothgar, considered in detail in the following chapter, was meant to point as clear a moral as the ambitions of the houses of York and Lancaster during the Wars of the Roses in Shakespeare's historical plays.

The king was expected to provide his followers with treasure and with land, according to their merits and rank, and — what was equally important — with plenty of chances for fighting. Stingi-

ness and lack of martial ambition were the worst faults that he could possess. The more distinguished chiefs and the other members of the royal family shared with him the management of affairs. Nobility depended upon birth — a respectable family tree was as necessary to a warrior as his sword. The men of higher rank constituted the main fighting force. The tried retainers, the *duguð*, are sharply distinguished in *Beowulf* from the *geoguð*, the younger and less experienced warriors. A particularly important group of fighters constituted the king's *comitatus*. Strong bonds of personal loyalty bound them to the king; they were his chief supporters and advisers; they rendered him unquestioning allegiance; they were bound to avenge him if he were slain or injured, and even to perish themselves, if they could get themselves killed, in case the exacting of vengeance for him proved impossible. In later times in Britain a distinction appears between the *gesibas* ("companions") and the *þegnas* ("servants") surrounding the king, though both were of noble blood, but this distinction is not observed in the epic. The constant use of synonyms imposed upon the poet by the demands of Anglo-Saxon poetic style resulted in frequent violation of the strict meaning of such terms. This is apparent when we consider the term *ceorlas*, sharply contrasted with the *eorlas* in Anglo-Saxon laws and documents, but in *Beowulf*

applied regularly to royal warriors and advisers, and once (2972) to a king himself. The strong democratic feeling in early Germanic communities may have assisted such confusions. The freemen receive no attention in *Beowulf*, but they were not despised. They were tillers of the soil, and no doubt sturdy fighters in time of need, but they did not make heroism a profession. They were dependents; they received protection from their betters, and rendered them yearly service. There is no justification in *Beowulf* for the idea that the whole body of freemen in arms constituted the fighting force. Only the professional warrior class receives mention. If the peasantry gave assistance, this was not held worthy of remembrance. Nor does there seem to have been, even in the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, a system of representative government in which all freemen had a voice. The basis for the rigid caste-system of the later Middle Ages is clearly observable, but, as Professor Ker has remarked,

the nobles have not yet discovered for themselves any form of occupation or mode of thought in virtue of which they are widely separated from the commons, nor have they invented any such ideal of life or conventional system of conduct as involves an ignorance or depreciation of the common pursuits of those below them. . . . The arts and pursuits of a gentleman in the heroic age are different from those of the churl, but not so far different as to keep them in different spheres.

There is a community of prosaic interests. The great man is a good judge of cattle; he sails his own ship.<sup>13</sup>

Feudal conditions are, however, clearly foreshadowed in the dependence of the laborers on the ruling class, and of the latter on the king. The exact conditions of land tenure are obscure and debatable, but it is clear that the king was expected to reward his most distinguished retainers by land as well as gold. A certain reserve of land and treasure was kept—the latter partly for ransoms (73). The epic takes no account of serfs, who were, in the main, captives taken in war. The poem never mentions them, if we except a highly doubtful conjectural emendation (*þēow*, 2223).

Germanic society is best analyzed on the basis of the two great principles of political allegiance and family allegiance.

One of the noticeable things about *Beowulf*, as contrasted, let us say, with the *Song of Roland*, is the small number of fighters. Poets of the earlier period preferred to celebrate a heroic little company rather than a mighty multitude, like the hosts of Charlemagne. The individual warrior assumed great importance, and personal allegiance to the sovereign was the first of his duties. No disgrace was deeper than disloyalty, or even failure to render the fullest meed of service. Conversely, no misfortune was greater than to be deprived of a protecting lord and the joys of the mead-hall, even

though a man were innocent of blame. The charming Northumbrian lyric known as *The Wanderer*, probably written at about the same time as *Beowulf*, or a little later, gives a vivid picture of the warrior deprived of those privileges.<sup>14</sup> The solidarity of the *comitatus* foreshadowed that devotion to a cause and to a chosen leader which has been one of the sources of the greatness of the English stock in modern days. How deeply ingrained this feeling was is well illustrated in the Old Saxon *Heliand* and the Anglo-Saxon *Genesis*. Christian epic could not depict the devotion of the apostles to Christ more vividly than as that of thanes to their king; and the Biblical story of the revolt of the fallen angels derived its chief poignancy from the tragedy of violated allegiance, and of the miserable condition of warriors deprived of their protecting chief. But this rigid system was bound to encounter difficulties in actual practice. The history of the Danish and Swedish royal houses furnishes striking illustrations: ambition to become king prevails over allegiance to over-lord; the breaking of faith brings its punishment to men like Hrothulf and Eanmund. Temporary fealty to a foreign king runs counter to loyalty to a sovereign at home: Weohstan the Geat fights against his own people, yet slays a prince of the house that he is temporarily supporting, because that prince has allied himself with hereditary foes. An oath sworn under

necessity, cementing allegiance to an enemy, conflicts with the duty of avenging a liege lord; and Hengest the Dane, in the tale of Finnsburg, is racked by conflicting emotions, and can make no decision until one is forced upon him. Such are the complications of divided allegiance.

Similar difficulties arise from the endeavor to be true to the second great principle, allegiance to kin. This obligation seems, on the whole, to have been somewhat less binding, and to have been the first to weaken with the passage of time. But it must not be underestimated. It is analogous in many ways to political allegiance. If the king or any member of the *comitatus* were slain or injured, the duty of vengeance fell upon the rest of the band. Similarly, revenge for injuries inflicted upon any member of the family or clan group was a sacred obligation resting upon all other members; until the injury had been wiped out, the honor of the clan was darkly tarnished. Since the reprisal often exceeded in severity the original offence, prolonged feuds were frequent. An eye could not always be exacted for an eye, or a tooth for a tooth. For good measure, more extensive mutilations were more satisfying. This sort of thing could not continue indefinitely in a civilized state, so settlements of injury by payment of money or its equivalent became increasingly common. One is struck by the prominence, in early legal codes, of the exact

enumerations of amounts to be paid for specific injuries,— so much for killing a man, so much for striking off a hand, and so forth. In such settlements a king or chieftain was the natural mediator. Ecgtheow, the father of Beowulf, slew Heatholaf, the Wylfing, and had to flee from the Geatas. He then came to the court of the Danish king, Hrothgar, who helped him out of his difficulties by sending money to the Wylfings to atone for the crime, and binding Ecgtheow himself by oath to keep the peace (459-472). Similarly, in the final adventure of the poem, the hoard of the dragon was plundered by a man who wished to get treasure to buy off an injury, and Beowulf, then king of the Geatas, apparently acted as mediator in the affair, and, by himself receiving for his services a part of the gold, inherited the curse that lay upon it. Tribal organization had its courtesies as well as its penalties; one of the most distinguished inter-tribal honors was the adoption of a foreigner into a native clan, as Hrothgar received Beowulf (946 ff.). Just how binding this ceremony was felt to be is not clear; but it must have involved some acceptance on the part of the "son" of supporting by force, in case of need, the cause of the family that he was joining. As time went on, and organized justice became stronger, devotion to the family grew less intense; but clan hatreds and feuds were difficult to extinguish. Violence gave way only gradually be-

fore the orderly processes of justice. Tribal law was somewhat like international law at the present day, liable to ruthless violation in times of passion. The surest redress was too often the wild justice of revenge.<sup>15</sup>

Occasions were bound to arise when the conventions of family allegiance conflicted with those of political allegiance, or with each other. A royal prince kills his brother by accident; what is the king to do? He is bound to exact vengeance on the slayer, as head both of the state and of the family. But how can he kill his own son? Again, the usurpations in the Danish and Swedish royal houses are a menace at once to tribal and family solidarity. A favorite theme with poets is the dilemma of a princess married to a foreign prince, who, at the outbreak of hostilities with her own people, is forced to choose between kin by blood and kin by marriage. Such is the fate of Freawaru, daughter of Hrothgar, of Signy in the tale of the Volsungs, of Gudrun or Kriemhild in the story of the Nibelungs. Marriages with this danger in the future were common in the feud-ridden England of the seventh century; Cyneburh, the daughter of King Penda of Mercia, married the son of his rival, Oswy of Northumbria, while Oswy's daughter married Penda's eldest son.<sup>16</sup> Different versions of the same theme represent fate working out in different ways. In the Nibelung story the course of action pursued

by the heroine is conceived in one fashion in Icelandic and in another in German tradition. The more hampered a society is by convention, the more distressing become the cases where convention does not prove a safe guide, where the choice must be made between conflicting duties.\*

The great fascination which these dilemmas exercised upon mediæval poets has hardly been adequately realized. They begin with primitive customs. In Irish, the great hero Cuchullin meets his death through a conflict of taboos: he must never refuse food offered him by women, and he must never eat the flesh of his *totem* (the hound: Cuchullin, "hound of Culann"). But as he is going to battle, women offer him dog's flesh "cooked with poisons and spells," which he is obliged to eat, and so his days are numbered.<sup>17</sup> The Viking Age offers striking illustrations. In the story of Gisli the outlaw, "Gisli suffered from the law because he had acted according to the best dictates of his conscience in a very complex situation: to avenge his wife's brother he slew his sister's husband."<sup>18</sup> Chivalry brought new complications, with its elaborate code of love-conventions. The lady in the *Yvain* of Chrétien de Troyes, debating with herself whether she may yield to the demands of love, and marry the slayer of her husband, faced a situation analogous to that of her distressed sisters of earlier days.<sup>19</sup>

Tragic motives in Germanic life, as they appear in *Beowulf*, will be analyzed in some detail in the following chapter. We must first consider briefly the evidence for the interpretation of the poem afforded by Scandinavian literature of the Viking Age and later.

Although this literature is all far more modern than our epic, covering a period from the middle of the ninth century to the time of Chaucer, or even beyond, it affords, by reason of its richness and variety, and its essentially pagan character, most instructive parallels and illustrations. The Viking Age is reckoned as extending from the first raids on the coast of Northumbria in the late eighth century to the settlement of Normandy in 911, or to the establishment of the great Scandinavian kingdoms in the eleventh century, particularly the empire of Cnut in England and Denmark. The Vikings, literally "creek-men" (*vik*, a bay or inlet, as in *Reykjavik*, the "bay of smoke," in allusion to the geysers), ran their small, swift boats into the estuaries of the North Sea, made swift attacks upon the dwellers near by, and often escaped before resistance could be organized. Commerce as well as raiding offered an incentive to Viking voyaging; it is probably no mere chance that the rise of Viking power in the ninth century is coincident with the extinction of the commercial prosperity of the Frisians. In the latter half of this century, dis-

satisfaction with the ambitions of the Norwegian king, Harold Fair-Hair, led a group of his chieftains to settle in Iceland, then inhabited only by a few shivering Irish hermits. In general, the Norwegians colonized the northern regions,—Iceland, the Scottish and Irish coasts, and the outlying islands; while the Danes preferred southern England and the Continent. But no sharp division of nationalities is possible. In 845 the doughty chief, Ragnar Lothbrok, sailed up the Seine to the site of modern Paris, burning and pillaging as he went; and in 911 Hrolf, or Rollo, made his famous settlement in France, in the territory still called Normandy. The activities of the Northmen were by no means confined to Western Europe, however. They penetrated into Spain, into Russia,—here the Swedes were of importance,—to Constantinople or “Micklegarth,” and their voyages to Greenland and North America anticipated Columbus by about five centuries.<sup>20</sup>

The lateness of the conversion of Iceland to Christianity (the year 1000) is noteworthy. While the Anglo-Saxons were absorbing the best surviving traditions of late classical and Christian letters, Norwegians and Icelanders were still clinging to a highly developed pagan polytheism, and embodying this in their poetry. Contact with Irish and knowledge of Irish traditions probably modified Scandinavian beliefs, but did not destroy their es-

sentially pagan character. Even after the introduction of the new lore of Christ, the Icelanders were singularly tenacious of older fashions. Consequently, their traditional heroic poetry, which had assumed highly artistic and sophisticated form, and their prose tales or sagas, most of them untouched or but lightly touched by piety, are of great assistance in forming a correct estimate of the institutions, legends, and poetic technique of their cousins, the English. Due allowance must be made, in comparing this literature with *Beowulf*, for changes wrought by time. Tribal culture took on new coloring, and events and motivation in story-telling were altered by the influence of Continental literature and by the natural instability of tradition. Yet fundamentally the institutions and spirit of the people remained unchanged.

The lays comprising the great collection of Icelandic heroic poetry known as the *Poetic Edda*, or *Elder Edda*, date in their present form mainly from the tenth and eleventh centuries, though some are later. Nearly all of them, however, embody traditions of high antiquity. Arranged by a mediæval compiler in rough sequence, and provided with explanatory passages in prose, they present a complete picture of the gods and heroes of Scandinavian story. The lays of the gods are chiefly important for the student of Anglo-Saxon as showing the general nature of the Germanic cults practised

in Britain before the introduction of Christianity by Augustine and the Irish. If we could recover the lays utilized by the poet of *Beowulf*, we should probably find Odin, Thor, and Frey looming up in the background. This earlier belief must have differed in important respects from that of the Scandinavians of the Viking Age. Few traces of the older pagan cults survive in extant Anglo-Saxon verse, however, so their nature remains obscure. The abundant gnomic and proverbial material of the earlier part of the *Edda* may be profitably studied by those who think *Beowulf* exceptional in its insistence upon propriety of conduct. The second section, which deals mainly with the great legend of the Nibelung Hoard, with Sigurd as its central figure, contains little that bears directly on *Beowulf*. The Anglo-Saxon poet refers in passing to Sigemund (884 ff.), to whom he credits the slaying of a dragon, probably the same exploit later attributed to his son Sigurd.<sup>21</sup>

A comparison of the style and emotional quality of *Beowulf* and the *Edda* is most illuminating. While analogous in verse-form, the Scandinavian lays differ strikingly from the Anglo-Saxon in their dramatic intensity and passionate fervor. Their strophic structure and narrative method suggest the ballad; they take much for granted, and often leap into the middle of a situation. Speeches often succeed one another without connecting narrative.

The tranquillity, leisurely movement, discursive-ness, and care for detail so noticeable in *Beowulf*, with its long lines unbroken by stanzaic division, are quite lacking. The lays are art-poems, but much closer to popular literary forms. The lost Anglo-Saxon songs which furnished the *Beowulf* poet with his material were probably stylistically different, having been in the possession of West-Germanic peoples long enough to take on other characteristics than are observable in Scandinavian. But the exact nature of the material which preceded *Beowulf* must remain a matter for speculation.

Much of the subject-matter of the heroic lays of the *Edda* reappears, in different and altered form, in the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* (*circa* 1205). This poem is, however, too late, too sophisticated, too much affected by courtly and chivalric conceptions and by the fashions of the newer romance, to form a true epic parallel to *Beowulf*. Older fashions of thought and action are clearly visible, particularly in the latter part of the story, but conclusions in regard to Germanic ideals must be drawn with caution. The version of the Sigurd-Siegfried legend in the thirteenth-century *Saga of the Volsungs and Niblungs*, as it is called in the charming translation by William Morris, is far more instructive. The earlier part of the saga, which tells the dramatic story of Signy and Siggeir,

contains illuminating parallels to situations in *Beowulf*, and throws a vivid light on Northern conceptions of duty.<sup>22</sup>

The extraordinary vigor of pagan tradition in Iceland is well illustrated by the *Prose Edda* of Snorri Sturluson. Snorri, who was assassinated in a family feud in 1241, is the most distinguished figure in Old Norse literature, most of which is, of course, anonymous. The *Prose Edda*, like the *Mabinogion* in Welsh, was compiled to give instruction to poets, whose calling demanded acquaintance with the heroic and divine legends of the past. The opening section, "The Deception of Gylfi" (*Gylfaginning*), sets forth pagan mythology in the framework of a dialogue between Odin and a certain King Gylfi. The second section, "The Poetry of Skalds" (*Skáldskaparmál*), begins, in similar fashion, with the conversation between a man named Ægir, deeply versed in magic, who journeys to the dwelling of the gods, and Bragi, the god of poetry and eloquence. More and more, however, the framework of dialogue is dropped, and instruction is given in traditional stories, and in the meanings of poetical expressions. The use of *kennings*, or rhetorical periphrases, so noticeable in Anglo-Saxon (*homera lāf*, "what is left by the hammers," that is, the sword; *heofones gim*, "the gem of heaven," that is, the sun), attained in the later skaldic verse of the Scandinavians such elabo-

rateness and intricacy that careful explanation is frequently necessary to show what the object described really is, and what the mythological references signify. Hence the necessity for such instructions as Snorri provided. The skaldic verse itself is not of high literary value. Most of it is a kind of heroic *vers de société*. Nor is it of great consequence for the student of *Beowulf*. The chief value of the *Prose Edda* lies in the summaries of the great heroic and mythological traditions of the North in its first two sections. The third part, the "List of Metres" (*Hattatal*), is of interest only for the specialist in Icelandic metrics. It must not be forgotten that the skalds, who attached themselves to kings and chieftains, celebrating them in song, making lays of derision against their enemies, and fighting stoutly with weapons if need arose, played a great part in the preservation and dissemination of heroic legends. They were great travellers, the knights-errant of literature in the days before feudal chivalry.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps, when all is considered, the prose sagas must rank as the most distinctive literary achievement in Old Norse. They embrace a wide variety of subject-matter: historical material relating to Iceland, Norway, Greenland, and the Scandinavian settlements around the British Isles; mythical stories, like the *Volsungasaga* just mentioned; and paraphrases of romantic material from Latin and

Old French. The best of them were written in the later twelfth and the thirteenth centuries, but they continued as late as the fifteenth century. The simplicity, clearness, and charm of the saga prose was quite unequalled in mediæval Europe; it suggests Addison or Defoe rather than Malory or Froissart. The narrative power and vividness of the sagas, despite digressions, genealogizing, and an occasionally wearisome elaborateness of plot, would be noteworthy in any age. The passages of skaldic verse, though in themselves frequently obscure, generally diversify the tales very happily. The most important of all the parallels to *Beowulf* is in the *Saga of Grettir the Strong*, in which the troll-legends appearing in the Anglo-Saxon epic are made to shed lustre upon an historical character of the eleventh century. Of high interest, also, is the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki*, which combines vague reminiscences of early historical tradition with the stuff of folk-tales. In this work, which dates from the fourteenth century, and in the later sagas generally, fantastic and childish elements are prominent, and the heroic spirit of earlier times is enfeebled. Episodes drawn from foreign countries were often quite unsuited to native settings. In the *Hrólfs saga* we can see clearly material found in more primitive form in *Beowulf*, but it is a matter of the greatest difficulty to separate this from the accretions that have grown up about it and

altered the motivation of the tale. Trustworthy results are almost impossible of attainment. Assistance is sometimes afforded by the *rimur*, ballads dating in their present form from the end of the Middle Ages, and, like the English, Scottish, and Danish ballads, preserving early traditions in popular form, and greatly altered. The troll-fights of *Beowulf* appear to be reflected also in the late sagas of Orm Storolfsson and Samson the Fair. The first of these is of minor significance; the second — a very significant and little-known parallel — is presented in a later chapter for the first time in English. Quite as necessary, perhaps, for a comprehension of the spirit of *Beowulf* are the typical sagas of the earlier period, the *Laxdale Saga*, the *Saga of Burnt Njal*, the *Saga of Gunnar Snake-Tongue*, which present no analogous incidents, but give striking pictures of the life of the Viking Age, and of the customs and ideals of that period.<sup>24</sup>

The Danes and Swedes have left little that assists in gaining a knowledge of conditions in *Beowulf*. Their early traditions must be laboriously reconstructed from references in West-Scandinavian literature, and from late and altered narrative material in Latin. The most important document of the latter sort is the *History of the Danes* of Saxo Grammaticus, who was a contemporary of King John of England. It may be compared in some ways with Layamon's *Brut*. Written at about the

same time, it is in effect a romance, preserving in chronicle form many old traditional tales. Saxo's bombastic Latin prose is, however, a far less admirable medium of expression than Layamon's sturdy English verse. Icelandic material, brought to Denmark by wandering minstrels, furnished Saxo with the bulk of his subject-matter; much else in the history is common European property, and only a minor part is specifically Danish. Christianity and the lapse of time have brought strange alterations. Odin, the majestic chief of the ancient Valhalla, is a terribly shabby and discredited figure in Saxo's pages. "There were of old," says the Danish monk, "certain men versed in sorcery, Thor, namely, and Odin, and many others, who were cunning in contriving marvellous sleights; and they, winning the minds of the simple, began to claim the rank of gods." No more than this one sentence is needed to show that great allowances must be made in reconstructing heroic legend from Saxo. Yet the feat may be accomplished, in one sense. The ingenuity of Axel Olrik rescued one of the finest and most popular songs of the North from Saxo's Latin paraphrase, the celebrated "Lay of Bjarki," a typical expression of the devotion of the retainer to his lord, and of reckless heroism on the field of battle. Genealogical relationships in *Beowulf* are illustrated by the *Skjoldungasaga*, preserved only in a Latin transcript, but containing

precious information about early Danish kings. A similar service is done for the Swedish royal line by the *Ynglingasaga*. No mediæval traditions of interest in the study of *Beowulf* have been preserved from Swedish sources, either in Latin or in the vernacular. The Swedes had less intercourse than the Danes with Icelanders, Franks, English, and Continental Saxons; and their early heroic traditions must be learned largely from other peoples.<sup>25</sup>

Minor sources may be quickly disposed of. Occasional assistance is given by genealogies, chronicles, and charters; by biographies in Latin and the vernaculars; by fragments of pagan epic material, as those dealing with Walter of Aquitaine and Hildebrand; and by the paraphrases of the Bible, the lives of saints, and the liturgy, associated with the English poets, Cædmon and Cynewulf, and their contemporaries. Of considerable importance is the remarkable group of lyrics, chief of which are *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Song of Deor*, *The Lover's Message*, and *The Banished Wife's Lament*, produced in the eighth century in Northumbria. These illustrate vividly the Anglo-Saxon elegiac temper, expressing itself in conventional themes: the loneliness of the warrior surviving the extinction of a glorious race, or lamenting the loss of a lord and the joys of the mead-hall; the anguish of a woman separated from her lover or her husband; the contrasts between past prosperity and present

misery. So strongly marked are the characteristics of this elegiac poetry that it is frequently possible to recognize in *Beowulf* native Anglo-Saxon elaborations of specifically Scandinavian traditions. We shall have occasion later to observe this in some detail.

For a full understanding of *Beowulf*, which touches life at so many points, no reading in the early Middle Ages is without significance. Whoever would enter completely into the spirit of the poem must survey a wide range of literature, pagan, Christian, and post-classical. Much of this, as we have just seen, is later than the eighth century; some of the significant Scandinavian analogues are as late as Chaucer, or even later. One of the greatest difficulties in reading for a better understanding of *Beowulf* is the making of due allowances for time and place, from the *Germania* of Tacitus to the latest Icelandic sagas and ballads.

### III

#### THE TRAGEDIES OF THE ROYAL HOUSES

HOW history serves the purposes of epic and gives realism and dignity to popular story can best be comprehended by reviewing in some detail the fortunes of the great royal houses of the Danes and of the Geatas. Such detail may appear confusing, but it would give a false idea of the extraordinary richness and complexity of the picture if it were too far simplified. The main outlines are clear enough, and we shall take great pains to keep these outlines constantly in mind. The events are, in general, not set forth in the poem in connected sequence; this sequence has to be reconstructed from scattered passages, and from references in later Scandinavian literature.<sup>1</sup> No attempts will be made in this chapter to distinguish fact from elaboration, except where this can be done safely, and where it illustrates how imagination moves along the paths of realism, not depending for its effects upon the supernatural. Our main effort will be to gain such a knowledge of the old stories about the Danes and Geatas as the poet

took for granted. And this must include events lying both before and after the action of the poem, since the fringes of tradition are often of high significance.

The first thing that strikes the reader, at the opening of the poem, is the emphasis upon the power and magnificence of the dynasty of the Scyldings. The Danes had once suffered a time of grievous distress, lacking a monarch. With the coming of the infant Scyld, who drifted to the shores of the country in an open boat, no man knew whence, a change came in their fortunes. Scyld became in due time a powerful monarch, striking terror to the hearts of neighboring peoples, and exacting forced tribute. The sovereigns succeeding him are rapidly reviewed. The beginning of the action is laid in the reign of Hrothgar, the fifth of his dynasty, who maintains its high traditions in superb fashion. As a symbol of his power, he builds a great hall, at once a banqueting house, a council chamber, a throne room, and sleeping-quarters, calling it Heorot, "the hart," after the lordly beast symbolical of royalty.<sup>2</sup> Its radiance, like the fame of Hrothgar, shines "over many lands." Here in this stately building sits the king, victorious in war, mild in peace, dispensing justice equitably, and dealing out treasure with a lavish hand. His domain presents an idealized picture of royal splendor.

The main purpose of all this is obviously to give a proper setting to heroic narrative. The audience is assured that it is to hear of no mean folk, but a great people, renowned in story, with an illustrious royal line derived from a half-supernatural founder. Such full-throated trumpeting of Danish glories has sometimes been regarded as having sprung, in an earlier form of the story on Scandinavian soil, from national feeling. But, as has already been suggested, such feeling was hardly possible in the earlier Middle Ages, in society as it was then organized, and nothing is plainer than the readiness of singers and audiences to busy themselves with illustrious foreign heroes. There is a subtler purpose, too, in emphasizing Hrothgar's apparent prosperity; it contrasts sharply with impending tragedy. The immediate danger confronting the Danes is the incursions of the demon Grendel, who comes slinking under cover of night to devour the revellers in the hall, and mock their boasted power. But the king faces troubles more serious than this. His sovereignty, won by disregarding the legitimate successor, can hardly pass unchallenged to his sons. A scheming nephew, aided, it would appear, by a treacherous counsellor, is already plotting to seize his throne. An ancient feud with the neighboring Heathobards is only temporarily quieted by the betrothal of his daughter to the Heathobard prince. His

great mead-hall itself is fated to go up in smoke and flames, with kin arrayed against kin beneath its walls. In a word, the house of the Scyldings, apparently so brilliant, is overshadowed by the darkest clouds of future calamity.

We are told that Hrothgar has ruled fifty years, that he is wise and venerated; but these are epic characteristics of the powerful king, like Charlemagne's *barbe fleurie* and Beowulf's reign of fifty years. Historically, he must have worn the crown a considerable length of time. Yet it rested uneasily on his head. The legitimate successor, after the death of his elder brother Heorogar, should have been Heorogar's son, Heoroweard. But for causes that are not clear this prince was passed over, and Hrothgar ascended the throne. This was not necessarily unlawful; the succession in Germanic kingdoms was, as we have seen, elective as well as hereditary, and Heoroweard may have been unfitted to rule because of his youth or for other reasons. A hint is dropped (2160) which indicates that he was, even in his father's lifetime, not treated with the consideration that he might have expected, but it is difficult to escape the conviction that Hrothgar's later troubles were due in part to his neglect of the rightful claims of his elder brother's son. It is certain that he shows him scant honor in the royal hall. Beowulf was wiser: when urged, after the death of Hygelac, by Hygelac's

own widow, to assume the sovereignty, he refused, preferring to act as protector for the prince. It looks as if the temptation to be king had been too great for Hrothgar, and as if he feared the nephew who might have worn the crown. For he favors Hrothulf, the son of his younger brother, who has no prior claim to the throne, giving him the place of honor beside him on the high seat, and making him his partner in war as in peace. Heoroweard, on the other hand, has no share in the brilliant festivities in honor of Beowulf, and the armor of his own father is given to Beowulf (2155-2162), a great shame and humiliation for the son. In the background of this dazzling court, then, lurks the neglected and insulted Heoroweard, hating equally the uncle who has supplanted him, and the cousin who enjoys the royal favor.

Meanwhile Hrothulf, the favored nephew, cherishes his own designs. He bides his time, accepting the honors that Hrothgar heaps upon him. But he is obviously not quite trusted. At the ceremonial banquet given Beowulf after his victory, there is in the speech of Hrothgar's queen, Wealtheow, a direct appeal to Hrothulf to support the succession of Hrothgar's sons,—and her sons as well,—the boys Hrethic and Hrothmund. After all that his uncle has done for him, says the queen, he can hardly act in any other way. And in the adoption of Beowulf as a son by Hrothgar we

may see — though the event is of course fictitious — an indication that the poet means to represent Hrothgar as desirous to gain a powerful ally for his sons, or a place of refuge for them at the court of the Geatas if they should need it. The plans of the treacherous Hrothulf matured slowly; much later than the main adventures of the poem, he assisted Hrothgar in war with the Heathobards. But the final tragedy is foreshadowed in dark hints. The statement in *Widsith* that "uncle and nephew held peace together for a very long time" (45–46) points to a later quarrel. When Hrothgar's son came to the throne after his father's death, Hrothulf at last threw off the mask. Scandinavian sources are of considerable assistance at this point. It appears that Hrothulf attracted to his person a body of the doughtiest Danish warriors, and after exploits abroad, returned one day to Heorot, and demanded of young King Hrethric its surrender. Hrethric parleyed, offering rich treasure, but Hrothulf refused these overtures, attacked the hall, slew Hrethric, and himself ascended the throne. What became of the young prince, Hrothmund, the brother of Hrethric, we are not told; perhaps he fell in the fight, perhaps he went the way of so many royal youths who have stood between ambition and a crown.<sup>3</sup>

It seems probable that Unferth, the *pyle*, or "orator" of the Danish court, obviously a promi-

nent counsellor, had some share in increasing the enmity between Hrothgar and Hrothulf. We are told — a suspicious circumstance — that he enjoyed the confidence of both. He was certainly a man with an evil temper and a bad reputation. His character is sufficiently revealed in the attack that he makes on Beowulf's courage at the ceremonial banquet. To accuse a guest of having failed to make good a boast was a deadly insult, to which Beowulf replied with great adroitness and dignity, mentioning in retaliation a shady page in Unferth's own history,—he had not treated his kinsmen honorably at the play of swords, an insult even more deadly than Unferth's, and met by no denial. Unferth does not appear in Scandinavian analogues of the story of Hrothulf; he may have been introduced into the tale by the Anglo-Saxons. We shall have occasion in the following chapter to examine in some detail the interlude in which he figures.

Perhaps one of the reasons why Hrothulf received much attention in *Beowulf* is that he became so famous a monarch, presiding, like Arthur or Charlemagne, over a court of distinguished warriors, and celebrated in song and story in Scandinavia under the name of Hrolf Kraki,—“Hrolf the tree-trunk,”—possibly in allusion to his height, like that of a tree with the branches lopped off, or to the crookedness of his figure. One of his champions, Bothvar Bjarki, was especially famous.

The older part of his name, Bjarki, — “the little bear,” — is strikingly similar in meaning to Beowulf, the “bee-wolf,” that is, “bear.” And it also seems likely that reminiscences of Beowulf’s exploits with Grendel were transferred to Bjarki, who, according to the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki*, comes from the land of the Gautar (Geatas) to the court of the Danish king, and defends him from the nocturnal attacks of a troll. Some scholars have even assumed that the two heroes were identical; but there are great differences in their careers, and the resemblances are not strong or numerous enough to warrant such a conclusion. On the other hand, it is easy to understand that when Hrothulf supplanted Hrothgar in popularity, tales of Hrothulf’s champion, Bjarki, might well be affected by reminiscences of the mighty deeds done at Heorot by Beowulf. In the saga and in Saxo, heroic legend is overgrown by a rank blossoming of the weeds of story-telling. The treachery by which Hrothulf won his throne was completely forgotten, and his honor, fortitude, and generosity were emphasized. At the time when *Beowulf* was composed, Hrothulf’s renown must already have been considerable, even though he had not yet, as in later years, completely eclipsed the fame of his uncle.<sup>4</sup>

Ambition and crime had made Hrothulf king of the Danes, but he was not to go unpunished. The rightful heir to the throne, according to strict

succession, the neglected Heoroweard, came at last into his own. Like Hamlet, he delayed long in his revenge, not venturing to attack Hrothgar, and even swearing fealty to Hrothulf, when the latter became king. He had been so long inactive that he was perhaps not regarded as dangerous. But his hour came; he took advantage of Hrothulf's foreign feuds to enlist for his fortunes a party of Swedes, with some followers of his own from Denmark, and struck to win the crown, slaying Hrothulf in his own hall. The courageous defence of Hrothulf, and especially the bravery of his champion, Bjarki, in the smoke and tumult of the burning hall, were long celebrated in Northern poetry, particularly in the famous *Lay of Bjarki*. But the triumph of Heoroweard was short-lived. He had won his throne at last, and was sitting as sovereign near the blazing ruins of his hall, and receiving homage. Suddenly he espied a single survivor of Hrothulf's men, and promised him protection if he would enter his service. The retainer agreed, but in the very act of swearing loyalty, stabbed Heoroweard to the heart. Thus was Hrothulf avenged, and thus the House of the Scyldings came to an end.

Contrasting with these dark figures stands the bright form of Freawaru, the lovely daughter of Hrothgar, equally entangled in the web of fate, but through no fault of her own. When the poem

opens, she is betrothed to Ingeld, prince of the neighboring Heathobards,—a match of love as well as of political necessity. Beowulf sees her on his visit to the Danish court, and, on returning home and relating his adventures to his sovereign Hygelac, prophesies that evil will come of her marriage. The old feud that her betrothal is designed to end goes back, as Scandinavian sources suggest, to the time of Hrothgar's father, Healfdene. Apparently Froda, king of the Heathobards, slew Healfdene, and the duty of revenge fell upon the latter's sons. If the *Saga of Hrolf Kraki* may be trusted, this duty was accomplished, and Froda died in the cinders of his own hall. Vengeance then passed to the Heathobards, but before they could attack the Danes, Hrothgar proposed that Frewaru and her dowry should end the feud, and so it was arranged. But the best part of the story was still to come, and the poet of *Beowulf*, anxious that his hearers should enjoy the tragic climax, adopted the bold device of making his hero *prophecy* to Hygelac the future course of events.<sup>5</sup> Probability is here sacrificed; Beowulf might have felt that no good would come of the match, but he could hardly have foreseen the course of future events in so detailed and accurate a way. The point is worth noting, as an example of how far the poet was willing to go for the sake of emphasizing the tragedy of history. When the bride and her retinue shall have

arrived in the halls of the Heathobards, one of the Danish thanes who are accompanying her will have the imprudence and tactlessness to wear the sword and armor of a Heathobard warrior, slain in past feuds. This will be no very pleasant sight for the Heathobards, and least of all for the son of the dead man, bound by custom to take blood-revenge. Then an old Heathobard warrior will egg on the youth to action, setting the ancient feud abroach, while the ale-beakers go round the hall. So vengeance will assert itself, the bride's thane will be murdered, and the slayer will make his escape, since he knows the country better than the Danes who would fain pursue him. Thus the old hatred between the two peoples will awake, the love of Ingeld for his young wife will cool, the oaths of peace and promises of friendship will be broken, and war will ensue.

That Beowulf prophesied truly, we know from *Widsith*, which relates that Hrothgar and Hrothulf "beat down the attack of Ingeld, hewed down at Heorot the host of the Heathobards" (45-49). It would appear, then, that the episode culminated in an invasion of Denmark by the Heathobards, that Ingeld attacked Hrothgar in his own hall, but was defeated and slain, though he succeeded in burning Heorot. The exact course of the story is not quite clear, and has been variously reconstructed. The unhappy Freawaru vanishes from the picture;

what became of her can only be imagined. Hrothgar, though victorious in the end, was humiliated by the failure of his diplomacy and the destruction of his royal residence.

The poet of *Beowulf*, it will be observed, emphasizes one particular scene in the story. Not the historical relationships. He makes small account of these; and as time went on, his own conception of them was completely blurred, Froda and Ingeld even coming to be regarded as Danish kings. Not the fate of the unhappy princess, or the sufferings of her husband or father. The one episode that poets most loved was the speech of the "old warrior," urging the son to blood-revenge. It had, no doubt, become one of the stock pieces of their repertory long before *Beowulf* was written, and it certainly continued as such for centuries, the very scene, perhaps, of the Anglo-Saxon lay that the pious Alcuin had in mind when he reproved monks for diverting themselves at table with songs of Ingeld rather than with praises of Christ, and put down "that damned heathen" where he belonged: *ille perditus paganus plangit in inferno*. We shall have occasion to notice this later in another connection.

Then at the ale-drinking an aged warrior speaks . . . who bears in mind all the deadly slaughter of men [in days gone by]. Bitter of heart and grim of purpose, he tries the temper of a young warrior, wakens war-enmity:

"Canst thou, my friend, see the sword, the dear weapon, which thy father bore to battle on his last fight, wearing his visored helmet, when the Danes slew him, when the bold Scyldings gained possession of the battle-ground, at the time when Withergyld fell, after the passing of heroes? Now the heir of one of those slayers, insolent in his armor, moveth about the hall, boasting of the deed, and wearing the sword which thou by right shouldst wield." So he urges on the youth again and again with bitter words, until the time comes when the thane of the queen sleeps in death, stained with blood from the bite of the sword, for the deeds of his father, having forfeited his life. The murderer escapes, for he knows the country well. (2041-2062.)

Heremod, a Danish sovereign not included in the Scylding genealogy in the poem, is nevertheless mentioned in a way that piques our curiosity. Violence and stinginess were his chief characteristics. He is twice contrasted with Beowulf: once by a warrior improvising a lay in the hero's honor (901 ff.), and once in a speech by Hrothgar (1709 ff.). The epic leaves us in the dark as to the full story, but later documents are of some assistance in reconstructing it. In the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and in certain of the Scandinavian royal genealogies, Heremod immediately precedes Scyld, as his father. But in *Beowulf* Scyld is founder of the royal Scylding dynasty. In Saxo's history the father of Scyld is named Lotherus, and his career presents striking similarities to that of Heremod. It may thus be possible to fill out the outline of

Heremod's career, which is only hinted at in *Beowulf*. Very great allowances must be made for alterations and discrepancies; it must always be remembered that Saxo wrote some five hundred years later than the poet of the Anglo-Saxon epic. Putting all the evidence together, however, it appears that Heremod, a younger son, went into exile when his elder brother ascended the throne. But this brother was incompetent, and the Danes longed for the return of the younger son. Their hopes were gratified; Heremod came out of exile, deposed his brother, and seized the crown. His evil nature soon manifested itself. He slew his companions in his drink, and, what was almost as bad, he failed to reward his followers with royal liberality. So his people had to get rid of him. Exalted at one time over all men, and then deposed, and sent into exile in misery and disgrace, he afforded moralists like Hrothgar an alluring theme. It seems likely that he may really belong in the Scylding genealogy historically. His name alliterates with the names of the members of that royal line, Healfdene, Heorogar, Hrothgar, and the rest, and the little story just reconstructed has an air of realism about it which may indicate a basis in actual fact. It seems improbable that the poet would have selected this example of royal depravity from the Danish house unless there had been some real foundation for it. Heremod may

have been dropped from the illustrious Scylding line in song and story, in consequence of his sins. Perhaps he preceded it, and poets took his expulsion from the kingdom, after which time the Danes suffered for lack of a leader (15), as a convenient opportunity for giving the rulers of the shield-men a new and glorious progenitor in the mythical Scyld, whose whole figure may be only a personification of the protecting shield of warfare.<sup>6</sup> We are, however, dealing with a baffling mixture of fact and fiction, in which guesswork has to be our guide. Decision is difficult, and perhaps of no great consequence. But Heremod must always be of interest to the student of Germanic conceptions of kingship.

After the pompous account of Danish glories at the opening of the epic, the picture of the royal court to which Beowulf belongs may seem a trifle colorless. The Geatas are indeed represented as a great people, and their sovereign, Hygelac, as a mighty monarch. But there are no loud trumpet-calls proclaiming the power of their ancestors, and court ceremonials are far more quickly disposed of. When Hygelac is first introduced we are told that "the building was splendid, the king was valiant, in his lofty hall" (1925-1926); then, after a somewhat elaborate compliment to his queen, the action begins forthwith. Similarly, at the opening of the final adventure, the poet wastes no time on

descriptions. "Then unto Beowulf's possession did the broad kingdom pass; well did he rule it fifty winters, aged king, old guardian of the realm, until, on murky nights, a dragon's ravages began" (2207-2211), and the tale of the dragon and his gold is fairly started. Information about the Geatas is brought in more episodically than in the case of the Danes, and not given prominence as a setting for the story. Yet, when this information is pieced together, the historical canvas is even more crowded with figures, and the action more complex.

Tragedy is again heavy in the air, as is natural in the closing adventure, which ends with the death of the hero and the extinction of his people. The fate overshadowing the Danes in the earlier part of the poem is far more subtly suggested. Each people suffered for the ambitions of its sovereign: Hrothgar deprived the rightful heir of his crown, and sowed the seeds of domestic calamity; Hygelac wantonly attacked a distant people, and drew hostility upon his folk in days when they needed all their strength to protect themselves against their neighbors the Swedes. For the student of heroic legend and early custom the tale of the Swedish wars is extremely important. A remarkable picture of inter-tribal warfare extending through three generations may be reconstructed, reflecting with great vividness actual conditions of Germanic life, and probably actual events. His-

toric fact, while frequently subordinated to human interest, is apparently little distorted. There is no great amount of external evidence to support this conclusion, but much in the character of the narrative itself.<sup>7</sup>

The two most prominent figures in the Geat royal family are Hygelac and Beowulf. They are, however, very differently depicted. Beowulf constantly betrays his origin as a folk-tale hero. A certain unreality surrounds him as king; he is more at his ease as a slayer of monsters. Hygelac, an authentic historical figure, is convincing enough as king, but he is less individualized than Hrothgar, and hardly more than the typical sovereign. He has little to do in the action of the poem save to receive the conquering hero, and afford him an opportunity to recount his adventures. But he serves as a convenient central person about whom the other kings of his house may be grouped. It will be clearest, in reviewing these kings and princes and their fortunes, to examine, first, traditions which appear to be founded mainly on fact, and then the processes by which Beowulf has been fitted into this historic setting.

Hygelac's father, Hrethel, was the *nefa* of Swerting (1203), of whom nothing is known. The word *nefa* may mean "nephew," "grandson," or merely "descendant." Swerting may have been an imaginary or collateral ancestor; a name alliterating

with "H" would be expected. One incident in Hrethel's life is remembered, mainly for its poetic value, though it may well be founded on fact. He had two sons, Herebeald and Hæthcyn. Herebeald was accidentally killed by an arrow from his brother's bow. This tragedy, as already pointed out, had an especial poignancy on account of the conflict of duties which it involved. Hrethel was bound to take vengeance on the slayer of his son, but, on the other hand, could not do violence to a kinsman. His sufferings are emphasized by the poet, who had in mind, apparently, the tragedy of Ermanric, the Gothic king who, according to Northern tradition, hanged his son Randver on the gallows because of Randver's guilty love for his father's bride.

Sad it is for an aged warrior to see his young heir riding the gallows; well may he then fashion a lay, a song of lamentation, when his son hangeth, food for the raven, and naught he can do will avail, old and wise though he be. . . . He looks with aching heart on the bower of his boy, on the wine-hall deserted, a resting-place for the winds, bereft of its joys. The horsemen sleep, the heroes in the grave; there is no sound of the harp, no cheerful clamor in the courts, as in days gone by. (2444-2459.)

This passage impressed Longfellow so much that he quoted it in *Hyperion* — though he identified the sorrowing father with "the old Danish hero Beowulf"!

Hrethel died of a broken heart. At no great time thereafter began the long and devastating wars with the Swedes.

This extremely complicated story involves the same motives which have been traced in traditions centring about the royal house of the Danes—long-standing enmity between neighbors, jealousies and rivalries at home, conflicts between family and political loyalty. Vague and distorted reminiscences of the tale are found in later Swedish, Danish, and Icelandic sources. Clearly, it was one of the great feuds of early story, the memory of which lingered long after it had lost the clear outlines recognizable in *Beowulf*.

The whole falls into two parts, according as the events lie before or after the reign of Hygelac. Underlying it all is the prolonged and bitter hostility which seems to have been the rule between neighboring tribal groups. The ultimate causes that produced this hostility between the Geat and the Swedish people are obscure. The first trouble of which the poem informs us occurred in the reign of Hæthcyn, the luckless king who had accidentally slain his brother. Savage raids were made into Hæthcyn's territory by Onela and Ohthere, sons of the Swedish king, Ongentheow. The name of the locality where these attacks centred is preserved,—Hreosnabeorh (2477),—perhaps a fortification, perhaps a height used as a

natural defence (*beorh*, "hill," "mound"). In retaliation Hæthcyn then led an expedition against the Swedes. This is told in circumstantial and apparently truthful fashion, in one of the most vivid passages in the poem, to which rather too little attention has been given (2922-2998; cf. 2479-2489). The Geatas were at first successful, and captured Ongentheow's queen; but a reverse quickly followed. Ongentheow, the aged Swedish king, slew Hæthcyn, and rescued his queen. After a hand-to-hand encounter, he and his men drove the Geatas to take refuge in the forest of Ravenswood, leaderless. Here the wearied warriors, surrounded by their enemies, were taunted through the night by the Swedish king, who swore that in the morning they should lose their lives, and some should hang on the gallows. But at daybreak the horn and trumpet of Hygelac, coming with reinforcements, were heard in the distance, whereupon Ongentheow and his men retreated to a fortified place. The fort was stormed by the triumphant Geatas; Ongentheow was attacked and wounded by Wulf, "so that the blood sprang out beneath his hair." But Ongentheow fought on undaunted, until his helmet was cloven by Eofor, the brother of Wulf, and he fell mortally wounded. Eofor despoiled him of his helmet, his coat of mail, and his sword, and carried them in triumph to Hygelac, who rewarded both brothers richly with land

and treasure, and gave to Eofor his only daughter as a bride.

Thus the first stage of the feud ended, and a new sovereign ruled each people — Onela the Swedes, and Hygelac the Geatas. Onela was probably married to a sister of Hrothgar the Dane (62), though the evidence for this is not conclusive. A time of peace succeeded; perhaps the Swedes did not care to attack the Geatas again, since the death of Ongentheow had been balanced by that of Hæthcyn, or perhaps they were afraid of Hygelac, who was no mean enemy. Nor do the Geatas seem to have been inclined to initiate fresh hostilities; it is significant that when Hygelac's restless ambition led him to foreign conquest, he turned his attention to the Franks and their allies in the Low Countries. But this expedition bore bitter fruit. After the defeat of Hygelac and his army, a fresh opportunity was given the Swedes to attack their weakened and humbled adversaries. Historically, this may well have been the sequel, though it is complicated, as we shall see, by other matters.

Before tracing the later struggles, which led to the annihilation of the Geat kingdom, we must look with some care at the accounts of Hygelac's ill-starred raid, as preserved in the poem and in Frankish sources. It is a twice-told tale, but it must be repeated, since a comparison with the

chronicles illustrates the methods of epic so strikingly. The deep impression that this historical event made upon popular imagination is shown by the frequent references in the poem (1202-1214; 2354-2366; 2501-2508; 2913-2921).

The chief testimony is in the celebrated *History of the Franks*, by Gregory, Bishop of Tours, who died in 594, only some seventy years later than Hygelac himself. Gregory began his book with the Creation, but fortunately was able, as some mediæval historians were not, to reach events in his own century. This gives his work especial value. At the beginning of his third book he tells how the kingdom of Clovis was equally divided between his four sons, one of whom, Theuderic, "had a handsome and able son named Theudebert." A little further on he describes Theudebert's successful defence against Hygelac and his marauding party. This probably lies in the latter part of the first quarter of the sixth century, about 516 to 520, though possibly later.<sup>8</sup>

After these events, the Danes with their king Chlochilaicus made for Gaul by sea with a naval expedition. After disembarking, they devastated one district of the kingdom of Theuderic and took prisoners, and having loaded the ships with captives and other spoils, were of a mind to return home to their own country. Their king remained on shore, intending himself to follow when the ships should have reached the open sea. When the news was brought to Theuderic that his terri-

tory had been laid waste by foreigners, he sent his son Theudebert into those regions with a strong army and great supply of war-gear. After killing the king, he defeated the enemy in a naval battle, and recovered all the booty stolen from the land.

The same tale is told in the *Liber Historiae Francorum*, a work of the eighth century, in part based on Gregory, with the addition of one interesting detail, that the attack was made on the “*Attarios vel alios*.” These are clearly the “*Hetware*” of *Beowulf* (2363, 2916). The nationality of the invaders is here, as in Gregory, understood to be Danish—a mistake natural enough from the point of view of Frankish historians, who would not distinguish clearly between different tribes of Scandinavian raiders.

Obviously, this engagement was long remembered, and there is evidence that Hygelac came to be conceived as a kind of Gargantua or Pantagruel. A passage in a Latin treatise, *On Monsters and Prodigies*, written probably in England at about the same time as *Beowulf*, represents him as a giant, *quem equus a duodecimo anno portare non potuit*, whose bones, as they lay on an island at the mouth of the Rhine after his death, were so large as to strike beholders with amazement. But curiously enough this account gets his nationality right, *rex Huiglaucus qui imperavit Getis*, and may also preserve correctly the general locality of his

defeat and death. Attention has recently been called to a manuscript in Leyden, which shows the forms "Hyglaco," "Higlacus," which are closer to the forms in the Anglo-Saxon epic than those in the other manuscripts. The Leyden writing is that of an Irish or Anglo-Saxon scribe. The inclusion of Hygelac in a collection of classical "monsters" suggests that the compiler was acquainted with the personages in *Beowulf*, and, with the evidence of the handwriting, points to composition in the British Isles. But the fact that Hygelac is made a kind of giant suggests familiarity rather with current oral traditions than with the epic.<sup>9</sup>

This episode furnishes an unusually significant test of the treatment of history in *Beowulf*. On the one hand, the epic, especially in one passage, parallels the documentary accounts quite closely. A loquacious Messenger prophesies trouble for the Geatas after the death of Beowulf.

Now must the people expect a time of war, after the death of the king is widely bruited afar unto Franks and Frisians. Strife was started fiercely against the Hugas, when Hygelac came faring with a fleet to the Frisian land, when the Hetware hewed him down in battle, conquered him by greater force, so that the mail-clad warrior fell, gave up his life amid his troop; in no wise did the prince give treasure to his men. Never since that time have the Merovingians been friendly to us. (2910-2921.)

The Franks (Hugas) held lordship over other tribes, even after their chief power was transferred to the south, into modern France, and of these tribes the Hetware (Hattuarii) dwelling along the lower Rhine, and the Frisians along the coast, were prominent. On the other hand, the whole point of view of the epic is different. To Gregory of Tours Hygelac was a pirate; to the poet he was a hero, whose defeat had to be portrayed as sympathetically as possible. The sting of this defeat is therefore softened by fictitious elaborations. Beowulf crushed the life out of Dæghrefn, the Frankish warrior who had slain Hygelac, and escaped by swimming, carrying thirty suits of armor back home. The Hetware could not boast of victory; "few escaped the warrior to see their homes again." Much is also made of the fate of the marvellous golden collar given Beowulf as a reward for slaying Grendel, and by him presented to Hygelac.

After Hygelac's death the throne passed to Heardred, his son. The epic states circumstantially that Hygd, queen of Hygelac, offered Beowulf "the hoard and kingdom, rings and the royal throne; she did not feel that the child [Heardred] could defend the ancestral seats of the kingdom against the peoples of other lands after the death of Hygelac" (2369-2372). Such an offer would have meant her own hand as well. Possibly tradition told of her marriage to Beowulf, and she may

be the widow who laments him (3150), if we read the passage aright. The epic states positively that her offer was refused; that Beowulf preferred to act as protector of Heardred during his minority. It is tempting to regard this as a special invention of the *Beowulf* poet, emphasizing his hero's generosity in not interfering with the legitimate succession, and contrasting him with the Danish and Swedish princes who caused great trouble by so doing. Beowulf's whole connection with political events must be fictitious, unless we regard him as having supplanted some other person, and for this there is no evidence.

Queen Hygd, daughter of Hæreth, may well be historical. She is described as "very young"; perhaps she was Hygelac's second wife. He had earlier given a daughter in marriage to Eofor. Yet he is himself described as "young" (1831). We must not take these epic descriptions of historical characters—even when they involve no element of the marvellous—too literally, or regard them as necessarily reflecting actual conditions. Conflicting traditions, carelessness, lack of concern for consistency, and desire for immediate poetic effect must all be considered. The picturesque tale of Offa and Thryth, introduced to emphasize the amiability of Hygd, in which reminiscences of the old Anglian king, Offa, are mingled with the folk-tale motive of the Perilous Bride, deserves special

study as an illustration of epic processes, and as being the only piece of Anglian tradition embodied in the epic. It has, however, no real connection with the subject in hand, and may be an interpolation.<sup>10</sup>

At this point the second part of the tale of the Swedish wars begins, complicated by a new motive, intrigue within the Swedish royal family. King Onela had two nephews who made trouble for him, Eanmund and Eadgils, the sons of his younger brother, Ohthere. Just what this trouble was, we do not know; apparently they were engaged in a conspiracy to seize his throne, and got the worst of it. At any rate, they sought refuge with young King Heardred. The vengeance of Onela reached across to the sister kingdom; he attacked the Geatas, and in the resulting conflict Eanmund was slain, and Heardred himself fell in the defence of his guests. Eadgils escaped. Onela then returned in triumph to Sweden.

There are certain interesting complications in this episode, which afforded special opportunities for poetical effect. Eanmund was slain by one Weohstan, a warrior in the service of Onela. Weohstan belonged to the Wægmundingas, apparently one of the most distinguished clans of the Geatas. Weohstan's son, Wiglaf, the young retainer who comes to the aid of Beowulf in the fight with the dragon, was a Wægmunding. Beowulf's

father, Ecgtheow, and of course Beowulf himself, are stated by the poet to have been members of this family, but their names do not alliterate with "W," or with each other, and it looks as if Beowulf had been given a prominent warrior for a father, and as if both had been arbitrarily assigned by story-tellers to the Wægmunding clan. But why should the Wægmunding Weohstan be serving under the Swedish king, and so fighting against his own countrymen and their allies?

Warriors often took service under a foreign prince, and were obliged, by the terms of this temporary alliance, to aid him in his campaigns. It was thus, apparently, that young warriors made the "grand tour," completing their education. This new duty might impose obligations as binding as allegiance to the king at home. In the shifting political relations of the times, in which friends quickly turned to foes, a man might find himself obliged to choose between his own people and the people of his adoption. Here, as always in such conflicts of duty, lay effective material for tragedy. Obviously the connection of Weohstan with the Swedes was unusually close; his son Wiglaf is described as prince of the Swedish dynasty of the Scylfingas, which looks as if Weohstan had married a lady of the Swedish royal house. So, when Onela marched against the Geatas, Weohstan chose to throw in his fortunes with the Swedes, and it is

highly significant that he is not reproached for so doing.

Another tragic conflict of duty faced Onela himself. As was the custom, he was offered the war-gear of his dead nephew, Eanmund, by Weohstan, who slew him. But this Onela would not accept, since tribal law forbade him to kill, or to connive at the killing of, a kinsman. Further than this, it laid upon him the duty of taking vengeance for such slaughter. Onela compromised; he could not think of taking vengeance on one of his own family, and yet he was bound to reward the slayer. So he did not receive the armor of the slain youth himself, but returned it to Weohstan (2611–2619). It passed in due time to Weohstan's son, Wiglaf, so that the sword which delivereded the decisive blow in the fight with the dragon was perhaps the very one that had been plunged into Eanmund's heart.

In tracing the events following the death of Heardred, we must be particularly careful to distinguish historic fact from epic elaboration. The account in the poem is clear enough: Onela, after the death of Eanmund and the flight of Eadgils, wore his crown unmolested for a time. Meanwhile, Beowulf succeeded to the throne of the Geatas, but attempted no immediate revenge for Heardred's death. But the wheel of Fortune came at length full circle for Onela. His rebellious nephew,

Eadgils, later succeeded in an attempt to seize the Swedish throne, and we are told that he was aided in this by Beowulf, who thus took a kind of belated vengeance. There was no further trouble with the Swedes during Beowulf's long reign of fifty years. But with the passing of the great hero after the dragon-fight a renewal of this old feud and war with peoples to the south is prophesied, as we have seen, by the Messenger, who brings the news of Beowulf's death, and urges that the treasures won from the dragon be burned in the funeral pyre with him, for in the future the Geatas cannot wear them in pride and security:

The flame shall devour them, the fire cover them, no chieftain shall wear a precious trophy with its memories of the past, no fair maiden shall adorn herself with a necklace, but heavy-hearted, bereft of their gold, shall they continually tread the paths of exile, now that the war-leader is done with mirth, with sport and the joys of the hall. Many a spear shall be brandished, chill in the morning, raised high in hand; no sound of harp shall rouse the warriors, but the swart raven shall croak eagerly over the bodies of the fated, telling the eagle how he fared at the banquet, when he and the wolf were rifling the bodies of the slain. (3014-3027.)

While the climax of the last adventure, the slaying of the dragon, forms a fitting close to Beowulf's career, it brings his achievements as sovereign to naught. For him to die, full of age and honors, defending his people against a supernatural ad-

versary, is glorious, but for the Geatas to suffer extinction at the hands of their hereditary foes, with all the humiliation which this entailed, is a sorry ending to the high adventure and prosperity that had gone before. No doubt the artistic effect of this catastrophe was carefully calculated; but it was an effect imposed upon the poet by historic facts that were too well known to be tampered with.

What were the actual events following the death of Heardred? In the first place, everything that is said of Beowulf must be discounted immediately. A folk-tale hero, he never really sat on the throne of the Geatas. The epic contains little to suggest that he has replaced an authentic king. The fifty years of his reign are obviously the round numbers of story-telling. Moreover, surprisingly little is told of this long reign. We can hardly suppose that, even under an ideally beneficent monarch, there would be nothing for the poet to record. The one event that sounds at all like an echo of fact is the assistance rendered by Beowulf to the Swedish prince Eadgils, in the rebellion of the latter against Onela. The slaying of Onela by Eadgils is no doubt authentic; the account of the early Swedish kings in the *Ynglingasaga* tells of a fight on the ice of Lake Wener, in which Ali (Onela) was slain by Athils (Eadgils). One of the royal mounds in Upsala may be identified with great probability

as the burial-place of Eadgils. But the Scandinavian tradition represents assistance as having come to Eadgils, not from the Geatas, but from the Danes, from King Hrothulf. The Danes may have "stepped into the place originally occupied by the Geatas," but even if this is true, it does not necessarily mean that Beowulf was leader of the Geatas in this engagement. A hero of Beowulf's prowess and spirit might be expected to take an earlier and more direct revenge for the death of Heardred, since this was one of the most binding duties that lay upon the Germanic warrior. Moreover, if Beowulf helped Eadgils to gain his throne, how does it happen that the Swedes are so unfriendly at Beowulf's death, ready to fall upon the Geatas as soon as the protecting hero has expired? It may be argued that this was caused by events which the poem does not mention; but it seems odd, in view of the details given by the Messenger, that no account whatever of such events should be included. The whole situation at the death of Beowulf is not at all what might be expected of a wise and powerful monarch. The name and the nationality of his queen are not given, and nothing at all is said of her save that she lamented at his funeral, if a somewhat damaged passage is correctly so read. He had no heir, and had apparently made no provision for the succession. One is tempted to ask how he could have allowed his people to get

into these difficulties if he were as wise as he is represented. While the poet is most detailed, picturesque, and precise in describing romantic adventures, he is everywhere vague in his references to the actual political events in which Beowulf was concerned after the death of Heardred, until he comes to the final downfall of the Geat people, and then precision begins once more. The probability is that, after the fall of Heardred, the last of his dynasty, the Geatas were soon completely subjugated by the Swedes. Another king or chieftain may have ruled for a short time. It is possible that Wiglaf is historical. The epic represents him as a youthful warrior, the son of Beowulf's uncle, who, after assisting Beowulf in the dragon-fight, is named by him as his successor. Perhaps the royal power passed to the house of the Wægmundingas, and the final disaster to the Geatas was averted for a time by Wiglaf, just as the disaster to the Anglo-Saxons after the death of Edward the Confessor was averted by Harold, an able man of another family. This would explain the connection of Beowulf, an imaginary person, with the clan of the Wægmundingas.

It is a temptation to fill in the outlines of these political events by conjecture. But this is dangerous. Disregarding so far as possible purely hypothetical occurrences, we may cautiously summarize the historical situation as follows. Upon

the death of Hygelac, the throne passed to his son Heardred, a minor, who was unable to maintain himself against the Swedes, and against his southern enemies, led by the Franks, whom his father had stirred to bitter enmity. He was caught, as it were, between the upper and the nether millstone. The Swedes gave the death-blow to his kingdom. They presently swooped down, possibly using hospitality extended to rebellious Swedish princes as a pretext, and, under the leadership of Onela, killed Heardred and inflicted a crushing defeat on the Geatas. Onela was later supplanted by Eadgils. The defeated Geatas were ultimately absorbed into the Swedish kingdom, and went out of existence altogether as a separate political unit. Just before this catastrophe, the Geatas may have turned to the powerful clan of the Wægmundingas to assist them, despite the earlier alliance of Weohstan, the Wægmunding, with the Swedish royal house, and have found in young Wiglaf a temporary leader before their final overthrow.

So much for history. But poetry will not willingly suffer a great people to perish ingloriously. Poetic imagination, when it sets to work to explain or to soften a mighty calamity, often turns to wonder-tales, disguising borrowed elements by specious realism. Men knew of the fall of the Geat kingdom; that was too well-known a fact to deny, but it was within the province of poetry to post-

pone the catastrophe and take away much of its bitterness by inventing new and glorious adventures for a fictitious Geat king. And so Beowulf, a hero borrowed from folk-tales, was made the nephew of King Hygelac, a member of the Wægmundung family, and the last great sovereign of the Geat people. This brought into alliance with him Wiglaf, as kinsman and helper. The folk-tale champion was metamorphosed into an illustrious ruler, distinguished not only for great deeds but for the peaceful protection of his kingdom, over which he held sway for fifty years. In a similar way, singers softened the defeat of Charlemagne at Roncesvalles by making Roland, a relatively undistinguished leader historically, a nephew of the great emperor and the doer of mighty deeds. Again, Arthur, probably one of the British chiefs who temporarily stemmed the advance of the Anglo-Saxon invaders, was exalted into a great general and king, victorious at home and abroad and a champion of marvellous adventures. In time, the original historical situation which gave birth to the Arthurian legend was completely forgotten in romantic elaborations. But in the earlier period, when the struggles of the Britons against the Anglo-Saxons held a prominent place in the story, there could be no pretence that the British were finally victorious; the supernatural legend had to be invented that Arthur should come from Avalon to deliver his people.

How the fictitious Beowulf, as protecting hero and glorious sovereign, was, by exercise of poetic imagination, fitted into the line of Geat monarchs, and how his death and the final extinction of his people were explained as due to the curse resting on the dragon's gold, will be traced in a later chapter. Historic facts, with which we are here concerned, gave him his setting, but could adorn his exploits with little of definite political importance. After the epic account is closed, he remains, despite all his royal dignities, a strayed reveller from fairyland.

## IV

### THE TALE OF FINNSBURG

QUIETE unconnected with the main business of the epic is the tragic story of the feud between Danes and Frisians, the paraphrase of the lay sung by Hrothgar's minstrel at the ceremonial banquet after the slaying of the demon Grendel (1068-1159). It far transcends in dramatic interest the historical legends which have just been reviewed, and it is purely realistic, with no intrusion of the supernatural, and with little epic exaggeration. Actual events may well be mirrored in it, although there is unfortunately little to aid in determining this. No historical documents or poetic narratives, except the *Finnsburg Fragment*, give other versions of the story. But its general character is plain. Even if it is not a record of fact, imaginatively treated, it is a record of what might have been fact, true to the spirit and customs of the times. The chief emphasis lies upon human passions, upon the tragic crises which confronted men and women in the unsettled yet highly conventional life of the Heroic Age. Certain typical situations, frequently utilized for poetic effect elsewhere in *Beowulf* and in Germanic story-telling in general, stand forth with great vividness. The

shadows are as strong as the high lights; much is left in obscurity. The minstrel's own words are not quoted, as many editions suggest, but summarized, just as in the song sung in Beowulf's honor during the return from the Haunted Mere (871-915). The way in which this paraphrase is arranged shows that the Finnsburg story as a whole was perfectly familiar, and that a knowledge of its outlines was taken for granted by the *Beowulf* poet. He was thus free to get special effects by stressing tragic and pathetic situations. This allusive method is tantalizing for us to-day; the course of events has to be reconstructed by conjecture and by study of analogous material. Patient labor has yielded a reasonably satisfying and connected narrative, but with many obscurities of detail. A completely different interpretation of the main outlines is by no means beyond the bounds of possibility.

We are singularly fortunate in being able to supplement the ninety lines of the minstrel's lay by a detailed treatment of one scene, in a little less than fifty lines, which is not elaborated in the epic. Dr. George Hickes published in his *Thesaurus*, in the year after the Battle of Blenheim, some verses copied from a leaf bound in with a manuscript of homilies in the episcopal library in Lambeth Palace. Unfortunately, this leaf has since been lost, so that we are obliged to

rely upon Hickes's transcript. There is no reason, however, to doubt the genuineness of the lines. Hickes was a conscientious though not always accurate scholar, and, despite some obvious errors in the copying, the passage stands the test of our better knowledge of Anglo-Saxon well. The proper names and the localization at Finnsburg connect it beyond any doubt with the narrative in the epic. By common consent, it has long been known as the *Finnsburg Fragment*, in contradistinction to the *Finnsburg Episode* (1063-1159) in *Beowulf*. It is defective both at the beginning and at the end. How many lines have been lost, no one can tell. It seems probable, from internal stylistic evidence, that not a great deal is missing, and that, if it were preserved in its entirety, it would form a good illustration of the Anglo-Saxon short epic lay. It contrasts sharply with the *Episode* in treatment. The latter is retrospective, stressing, in the outlines of a complicated story, special scenes of pathos, tragedy, and revenge. The *Fragment* gives a vivid and detailed account of a single scene, a night attack upon a hall, and its successful defence. The reader must bear in mind that, though telling a scene in the same story, the *Fragment* is absolutely independent of the *Episode*.<sup>1</sup>

The circumstances under which the minstrel sang his lay in Hrothgar's hall are important for an interpretation of the story. The subject was

selected with a view to giving pleasure to the feasting Danish warriors, celebrating the triumph of a foreign hero, who had performed a feat that they had themselves striven in vain to accomplish. This might well be a little galling to them. That it actually was so is shown by the speech of Unferth at the banquet before the fight with Grendel. So the court poet adroitly selected a tale of Danish heroism and Danish vengeance, a tale of the complete and satisfying victory of the Danes over their ancient enemies, the Frisians. And this would have been equally pleasing for Beowulf to hear. His own people were no friends to the Frisians; Hygelac later selected their coast as the objective point of the great raiding expedition in which he lost his life, and in the later part of the epic Frisian enmity against the Geatas is much emphasized. The whole *Episode* must be read, then, with the grand climax at the end in mind: the absolute and complete vengeance of the Danes for the injury inflicted upon them by the Frisians.

The foundations of the tale are laid, as so often, in inter-tribal feud. Nothing is said of the ultimate causes of this deep-seated hatred; it seems probable that it was an ancient grudge, temporarily healed, but ready to break out with renewed intensity. Historically, Danes and Frisians were foes; raiding expeditions along the coast seem to have been frequent. The opponents of the Danes

are sometimes called Frisians and sometimes Eotens in the *Episode* (the word occurs only in the genitive *Eotena* and in the dative *Eotenum*). It looks as if the Eotens were the Jutes, or *Ēotan*, and as if the poet had confused *Ēotan* with *eotenas*, "monsters," "giants." He seems to have fallen into this error elsewhere. The Danish king Heremod was sent into exile *mid eotenum* (902), which has sometimes been taken to mean "amongst monsters," and sometimes "amongst the Jutes." That the latter is really the meaning of the word in this place seems clear from a passage in the Swedish chronicle of Messenius, in which the Danish king Lotherus, who appears to have inherited the adventures of Heremod, is stated to have taken refuge among the Jutes, *superatusque in Jutiam profugit*. I believe that we are to assume that the Frisian king commanded a mixed body of Frisians and Jutes, and that the poet used now the one name and now the other, for the sake of variety, and in deference to the demands of alliteration. It has already been noted that the larger political groups were composed of different tribes, and that in epic narrative reference might be made to one or another of these tribes, by a kind of ethnographic metonymy. In the present instance, alliteration is particularly easy for the poet if he can refer to the opponents of the Danes as Eotens, since this word can alliterate with any

other word beginning with a vowel or diphthong. Dr. Chambers believes that it is important for the plot to distinguish sharply between Frisians and Eotens, and that the latter are the true villains of the drama. We shall return to this point later; for the present the story may be outlined in the simpler and more usually accepted fashion.<sup>2</sup>

In a nutshell, the action is as follows. A band of Danes under their prince, Hnæf, are attacked at night, while quartered in a hall as guests of Finn, king of the Frisians. Many warriors on both sides are slain, among them Hnæf. Since they have fought indecisively, and to utter exhaustion on both sides, a truce is arranged, whereby the Danes are to remain for the winter under the overlordship of the Frisian king, and be treated with all honor. In the spring, Hengest, the leader of the Danes, is driven by the restlessness of his men to take vengeance on the Frisians. In the ensuing attack, Finn is killed, and his queen and treasure are taken back to Denmark in triumph. The whole tale falls naturally into two parts: the events preceding and following the long winter during which the Danes brood darkly on schemes of revenge. In the first part, the poet is most interested in the scene after the hall-fight, with the terms of the truce, which are set forth in detail, the funeral of the slain warriors, and the despair of Hildeburg, the queen of Finn, a sister of Hnæf,

who has lost both a brother and a son, fighting on opposite sides. In the second part, the slow oncoming of spring is pictured, and the mental struggle of Hengest, torn between fidelity to his oath to Finn and the duty of vengeance for his dead prince.

We must now look at the *Episode* in detail. The opening lines (1063 ff.), which give the setting of the whole, and introduce the paraphrase of the minstrel's lay, are important:

Then was there mingled song and music before the battle-chieftain of Healfdene [Hrothgar]; the harp was struck, a lay often extemporized. Then it fell to the lot of Hrothgar's minstrel, across the mead-benches, to sing of a joyful thing to hear in the hall, the swift attack falling on warriors of Finn.<sup>3</sup>

The poet thus alludes at the outset to the end of the tale, the moment for which the listening warriors in the hall waited, "the swift attack falling on warriors of Finn," the final vengeance of the Danes. There was no objection to anticipating the outcome, since this was already known. Interest in heroic story lay, not in suspense, but in opportunities for emotional effect afforded by tragic complications and for alluring details of narrative.

After the brief introduction, the story proper begins, with the attack on the Danes and the death of Hnæf. Since this was a temporary triumph for the Frisians, and would be no very

agreeable subject for the feasting Danish warriors to linger over, it is quickly dismissed, in two lines, and the poet concentrates attention on the woes of Queen Hildeburg. The *Finnsburg Fragment*, which describes this attack fully, can do so with no loss of dramatic effect, since it is in no way connected with the setting of the lay in Hrothgar's hall. Queen Hildeburg, we are told, "could in no wise praise the good faith of the Eotens"—the typical Anglo-Saxon method of saying that she could well accuse them of treachery. Did Finn invite the Danes to his court with the design of murdering them? Or did some unlucky word or deed set the ancient quarrel new abroach, and lead to a tragic violation of hospitality? Were the Danes themselves in some degree responsible for the quarrel? We cannot tell. It is easy, however, to recognize typical situations of Germanic poetry,—the princess married as a "peace-weaver" to a foreign king, who has earlier been hostile to her people; the treacherous hospitality with murder looming up darkly in the background; the bloody hall-fight after a night-attack; and the sufferings of the unhappy lady. The details and treatment of these situations vary from tale to tale, but there are striking parallels in the story of Ingeld and Freawaru, in the scene at the court of Attila in the Nibelung legends, in the crime of King Siggeir and the dreadful revenge of Signy in the Volsung story.

It is noteworthy that the first point which the *Beowulf* poet selects for emphasis is the tragic conflict in the heart of Hildeburg. Her pathetic desolation as she stands in the gray morning, looking at the bodies of her son and her brother, loathing the treachery that has caused it all, sorrowing for the hard-pressed kinsmen from her homeland, yet bound by years of marriage to their hated foeman — all this is the very bone and sinew of Germanic lyric and epic poetry.

Not less significant is the fact that the poet devotes twenty lines to the truce concluded after the hall-fight. This, indeed, does require explanation. The strict ethics of the *comitatus* made it a disgrace to survive the death of a leader, unless he could be fully avenged; and in this instance, not only is the Frisian king not killed in reprisal, but the Danish warriors agree to accept his overlordship. For the satisfaction of the listening Danish warriors in Hrothgar's hall, the extraordinary circumstances that led to this arrangement had to be fully explained. It is clear that the Frisian party suffered great losses in the hall-fight; "battle snatched away all the thanes of Finn, save a few survivors" (1080). But, on the other hand, the Danes, a relatively small body at the start, could not conquer the Frisians, especially after the loss of their leader, Hnaef. Both sides had fought to a standstill, and to utter exhaustion. At this

point, Finn made a proposition to the Danes: they were to have another hall, all their own, with a high-seat for the chief; they would have equal rights with his own men, and receive from him as much as the Frisians in the usual distributions of treasure,—provided they would accept him as their lord. It was a dreadful situation for the Danes; Finn was the *bana* of Hnæf (1102), the man who bore the technical responsibility for his death, even though the actual slaying had been done by somebody else. To accept him as their over-lord was a terrible breach of tribal custom. But what were they to do? Winter was upon them; they could not take ship and return home; they had to have food and shelter, and they had fought so long (five days, says the *Fragment*) that they could fight no more. It was an *impasse*; an irreconcilable conflict between human endurance and the ethics of a rigid code. So the Danes finally accepted Finn's terms. All the emphasis, as would be expected in a telling of the tale to Danes, is upon the promises made by the Frisians and their allies. Finn expressly agreed that his enemies should have every consideration. If any Frisian should taunt the Danes with having taken service with the *bana* of their lord, the sword should be the end of him. The situation was a dreadful and impossible one, but "it was forced upon them" (1103). They had no choice. Just here lay the

fascination of the tale for a Germanic audience. We have noted already that poets loved to draw themes for drama from conflicts between different aspects of tribal duty, or between such obligations and the 'acts of human life. The situation was not comfortable for the Frisians; it was big with tragic possibilities for them. They must have recognized that the truce could be only a temporary expedient for getting through the winter, until the sea should be navigable in the spring, and the Danes could leave for their own country. Later on, there would inevitably be fresh trouble; the duty of revenge would assert itself once more.

The funeral of the dead warriors of both parties is etched in a few vivid lines. A huge pyre was erected, adorned with armor and gold. Upon it were placed, among the rest, Hnæf the Dane and his nephew, the son of the Frisian king. Beside the fire stood the heartbroken Frisian queen. The flames sprang up, crackling and roaring, the bodies burst with the heat, blood poured down the pyre beneath the curling smoke. When all was over, the Frisian warriors returned to their own homes,<sup>4</sup> and all settled down for the winter. The Danes, with heavy hearts and grievous wounds, occupied their hall, while the winter storms raged outside.

Here the first part of the tale ends. Before tracing the tragic sequel, we must look with some care at the account of the hall-fight in which Hnæf

lost his life, as told in the *Fragment*. This is a remarkable piece of rapid and vivid narrative. The Danes are quartered in a hall by themselves. Apparently they are the honored guests of Finn; if there have been presentiments or foreshadowings of trouble, we are not informed of them. The "battle-young" Hnæf keeps watch while his followers sleep. Suddenly a gleam in the moonlight attracts his attention. Is it a dragon flying through the air? is it the first beams of dawn? is it a fire in the gable of the hall? No, an attack! Their shining armor has betrayed the stealthy traitors. Hnæf rouses his men, they rush to arms; Sigeferth and Eaha defend one door, and Ordlaf and Guthlaf the other. Outside the hall Garulf, son of Guthlaf, calls out in a clear voice, asking the name of the defender at the door within. The proud answer comes back: "Sigeferth is my name; I am prince of the Secgan, a wandering champion known far and wide. Many woes and hard fights have I survived; as for you, it remains to be seen what fate you will suffer at my hands." Guthlaf, not heeding the counsel of a more prudent companion, Guthere, — the definiteness of the names gives great realism to the scene, — rushes to the attack, and is the first of the besiegers to fall. The fight is on, the raven hovers above, swords gleam as if all Finnsburg were in flames! Well do the thanes of Hnæf repay the generosity of their leader. Five

days they fight, and no one of them falls; they defend the hall successfully. Then one of the besiegers retires, the king (Finn) asks after the wounded,— and the *Fragment* is at an end.

On the whole, all this agrees very well with the narrative in the *Episode*. We should indeed expect the divergences to be greater, in view of the characteristic shiftings of epic narrative. There are one or two minor inconsistencies. The Ordlaf of the *Fragment* is no doubt the Oslaf of the *Episode*. Garulf, the impetuous young hero who first attacks, is called “son of Guthlaf,” and Guthlaf was one of the defenders of the doors. If they are father and son, why are they fighting on opposite sides? Possibly circumstances have allied the two with different parties — a common device to arouse interest in Germanic poetry; possibly the father of Garulf is another Guthlaf than the Dane inside the hall; possibly the phrase “Guthlaf’s son” (*F.* 35) is a scribal error for “Guthere’s son” (*cf. F.* 20). Again, the *Episode* apparently states that not only Hnæf but others (1084) fell; the *Fragment* states certainly that no one of the defenders fell. This looks like epic exaggeration, a desire to exalt the supreme valor of the Danes. The *Episode* would have no point without the death of Hnæf and the obligation of vengeance, which motivate the entire tragic situation. In the *Fragment*, a detached lay, apparently, no such event was required. However,

in discussion of the narrative as a whole, the discrepancies between the two accounts may be dismissed as of little importance.

The second part of the story has been aptly termed "the tragedy of Hengest."<sup>5</sup> He was apparently not of royal blood, but the chief retainer of the dead Hnæf, the ablest man in the party, on whom the command of the Danes devolved. His position was one of extreme difficulty and delicacy. He and his men were in a foreign land, in the dead of winter, among bitter enemies. They were bound by oath to keep the peace, and he, as leader, was additionally responsible. They all longed to return home, but this was impossible until spring. Desire for revenge and a burning sense of wrong filled their hearts. Decision as to future action depended upon Hengest. They could, of course, mature a plan for revenge to be executed after they had left Finn's domains. But could they leave without striking a blow at the *bana* of their lord Hnæf? Nothing but the oath to Finn stood in their way, but this oath was of the most solemn and binding character, allegiance to an over-lord. In this dilemma, Hengest temporized. Finally spring came, the bosom of the earth grew fair, the stormy sea subsided—and the restless Danes could contain themselves no longer. One day the son of Hunlaf came to him, bearing a sword, the edges of which "were well known among the

Eotens," — which probably means that it had done service earlier in the hall-fight, — and formally presented it to him.<sup>6</sup> Hunlaf was apparently (on the evidence of the *Skjoldungasaga*) a brother of the princes Guthlaf and Oslaf (Ordlaf). Perhaps he had been killed in the hall-fight, and his son was especially desirous of vengeance for his slain father. At all events, the presentation of the sword was a call to action, and Hengest wavered no longer. He recognized the superior claim of immediate vengeance. And "horrid bale fell upon Finn in his own home." Just what happened is not told; probably the Danes surprised the Frisians in an unguarded moment, after the long months of inaction. But one thing is clear: that the final attack upon Finn and his men forms the great climax of the story, the whole point of the telling of the tale at Hrothgar's feast. Danish revenge was accomplished with dreadful thoroughness. Grim exultation and bitter reproach accompanied it; Guthlaf and Oslaf cast in Finn's teeth all the woes that had befallen them since that first fateful journey across the sea to Finnsburg. Finn was slain in his own hall, which ran red with the blood of his men. Hengest and his followers, taking with them all Finn's treasures and his unhappy queen, sailed back to their own country in triumph.

Is not this final victory clouded by dishonor? Does not the fact that Hengest proved false to his

oath to Finn place him and his warriors in a bad light? No offence had been given by the Frisian party, so far as we know, since the conclusion of the truce; they had played the game fairly. Would it not have been a more satisfying tale, from the Danish point of view, if Hengest had waited until, after a stay in his own land, he could return and wipe out the old score? The submission to Finn had obviously been only an expedient for getting through the winter; it cannot have been thought of by either party as a permanent arrangement. Finn could not have expected that the Danes would remain with him after a return to their own land became possible, but he had every reason to think that they might observe the terms of the oath until after their stay in his domains was over. Does not the whole tale, then, involve the moral shame of the Danes, despite the satisfaction of the great duty of blood-revenge?

No. If this had been the case, the lay could hardly have been sung to gladden the feasting warriors in the hall of Hrothgar. In the first place, Hengest had to choose between conflicting moral obligations. He finally chose the one which seemed to him the more imperative, and which seemed so to his men. It is hard for us at the present day to realize the shame felt by a Germanic warrior if he failed in his full duty to his leader, or the disgrace of having to give allegiance to the

slayer of his prince. Nothing could obliterate such humiliation, even though sealed by a forced oath, excepting thorough and bloody revenge. Moreover, early conceptions of the sanctity of an oath were different from those of to-day. Jiriczek, in commenting upon the story of the Nibelungs, points out that, while blood-vengeance was the holiest of duties and good faith the noblest of virtues,

Germanic conceptions of good faith did not exclude crime and treachery, deceit and the breaking of oaths, for this conception was, as history and poetry show, in no wise an abstract ethical law, of general application to everyone; it first gained inner sanctity and universality through the influence of Christianity. To the Germanic warrior, keeping faith was only a matter of personal relationship, grounded in morals and manners, between peoples connected by ties of blood, marriage, hereditary or voluntary service; against enemies, whether of the family or of the over-lord, or of the individual himself, bad faith, treachery, even the breaking of oaths, were regarded as permissible. And so heinous treachery may accompany the highest virtue: Hagen faithlessly murders Siegfried as the avenger of his insulted lord, to whom he is faithful unto death; Kriemhilt, who attacks her own brothers, commits the crime out of fidelity to Siegfried.<sup>7</sup>

So Hengest, when confronted with the supreme duty of taking vengeance for his lord, finds in oaths sworn to an enemy under compulsion no permanent and binding sanctity.

A very different view of the whole story is taken by Professor Chambers, whose wide and accurate knowledge of early ethnographic and social conditions makes his opinion of great importance.<sup>8</sup> He thinks that the blame for the attack upon the hall rests with the Eotens and not the Frisians, because Hildeburg "could not praise the good faith of the Eotens." He recognizes that different tribal names might severally be employed for a combined force taken as a whole, but he is not willing to concede that the forces under Finn may in this story be referred to, now as Frisians and now as Eotens. His theory is that Finn's own men "wake to find a battle in progress" and are drawn in on the side of the Eotens, their allies. But there is nothing to support this in the *Episode*; it is pure hypothesis. He continues his reconstruction: "Finn's son joins in the attack, perhaps in order to avenge some young comrade in arms; and is slain, possibly by Hnæf. Then Finn has to intervene." But nothing is said in the text about avenging a young comrade, or the slaying of Finn's son by Hnæf. It seems to me dangerous to erect an imaginative structure to motivate so important an event as the forced intervention of Finn, which is also imaginary. Professor Chambers thinks that Finn is "blameless," though he is called the *bana* of Hnæf. But the word *bana*, to quote a note from his own edition of the poem,

"must mean 'slayer,' not merely 'foe.'" Finn either slew Hnæf himself, or was regarded as responsible for his death, as a chief was responsible for the acts of his retainers, according to Germanic custom. I do not see how *bana* can be "a perfectly neutral word," especially since the *Episode* tells us that the agreement was that the Danes should not be taunted because they were following the *bana* of their lord. If Finn's responsibility was a mere technicality, why should the Danes be so carefully guarded from this reproach? "Surely," says Professor Chambers, "a man may be touchy about being taunted, without being regarded as having done anything disgraceful." But it *was* disgraceful, according to the code, for warriors to give allegiance to the man responsible for the death of their lord; there is no getting around that. The point is that extraordinary circumstances, for which the code did not provide, forced the Danes into that position. How seriously the taunting was taken is shown by the lines that follow. If any Frisian did let his tongue get the better of him, the sword should be his punishment.<sup>9</sup> Professor Chambers, however, will not allow that the compact was possible. "It is strange enough in any case that Hnæf's retainers should make terms with the slayer of their lord. But it is not merely strange, it is absolutely unintelligible, if we are to suppose that Finn has not

up. Had the poet of *Beowulf* striven to make his narrative baffling and obscure, while preserving his general artistic aim, he could not have succeeded better. He has left us unsatisfied, but he has nevertheless allowed us to catch the blurred outlines of a great and moving tragedy. Its wild passion strikes, like a vivid cross-light, athwart the placid epic atmosphere of its setting. It would lend itself readily to dramatic form, with its sharply contrasted scenes — the treacherous attack on the hall in the moonlight, the breaking of dawn on the slain warriors and the weeping queen, the blazing pyre lighting up the grim and blood-stained faces of deadly enemies, the long, gloomy winter vigil of the desperate and humiliated Danes, the secret presentation of the sword, the fierce attack on Finn's hall amid curses and reproaches, and the final voyage of the treasure-laden ship with the triumphant Danes taking a last look at the bloodstained Frisian land. It is finer matter than the tale of Oedipus, in that pursuing Fate lies in men's own passions, not in external influences determining their destinies. Somewhere in the lost poetry of the Heroic Age there lies, perhaps, an epic narrative not unworthy of the greatness of the theme.

## V

## SCYLD AND BRECA

IN THE preceding pages we have been dealing with historical conditions, or with imaginative but mainly realistic elaborations of those conditions. We now turn to themes in which the supernatural is the essential part of the narrative, in which the element of fantasy is not secondary but fundamental, though rendered speciously plausible by its historic setting, and by realistic detail. These themes are far more difficult of investigation. In dealing with historical or semi-historical personages, shadowy though they may be, and obscured by the mists of time, we come to grips, after all, with fact. But nothing is more elusive than the shifting processes of popular imagination. Rigorous attention to method is here especially necessary; the temptation to analyze the picturesque fantasies of the past by giving rein to our own imagination must be sternly repressed. The true guidance comes in a study of the beliefs of early peoples, and of the survivals of those beliefs in modern times. Even here the ways are often dark. An analysis of the supernatural material in *Beowulf* will depend a good deal upon the investigator's general beliefs in regard to early

mythological processes and the transmission of popular material, matters which have been hotly discussed for generations, and about which final and satisfactory evidence is very hard to obtain. Scholarly fashions have changed here far more than in historical investigation. In general, the methods and results of the older students of historical conditions have stood the test of time, while their conclusions in regard to "mythology" have been substantially modified, and in some cases wholly abandoned.

In *Beowulf* — which is, as we have seen, in no sense a primitive work of art, or one reflecting purely popular conditions — the problem is especially difficult. The whole tone of the epic is far removed from the simplicity of folk-tales, from the childlike belief that the world is ruled by a multitude of invisible deities and plagued by legions of ghostly foes. The stories that it embodies were indeed born of that habit of mind, but the sophistications of courtly life, the cultivation of a reading age, and the effects of a new and essentially monotheistic religion brought great alterations. There can be little doubt, I think, that the poet of *Beowulf* believed implicitly in the existence of spooks like Grendel and of dragons like the one that dwelt near the Eagles' Ness, but he certainly conceived them in a different fashion from that of the simple credulous fellows who trembled

at the tales of their ravages, over roaring firesides at wintertime. Beowulf himself meets his demons clear-eyed, with the heroism that springs not only from valor but from consciousness of virtue, and from faith in the True God. To him they afford occasion not only for heroic achievements, and for the protection of suffering mankind, but also for the defence of the settled orderly happiness of the civilized state. It is the duty of a sovereign and of those who would uphold human sovereignty to meet and destroy them.

In studying the origins and development of the supernatural "machinery" in *Beowulf* we must make the effort to reconstruct the more naïve conceptions on the basis of which the later and more artistic narrative has been composed. Direct guidance for this in early times is lamentably lacking, however. It may be understood most clearly, perhaps, from a study of the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*. These sources are relatively late and sophisticated, and they have not been unaffected by foreign elements, but they are of great importance because they reflect pagan religious conceptions, and because they are highly detailed and explicit. They have a particular significance for the student of *Beowulf*, since it was among the Scandinavians that the whole background of the supernatural in the epic may be supposed to have originated. The general outlines of the Norse

worship are believed to be valid for Danes and Swedes and Angles and Saxons as well, though the evidence to support this has largely disappeared. There were of course, in any case, great variations in pagan cults in different countries and at different times. The deities that the Icelanders venerated were numerous — some of them highly important, like Odin and Thor and Balder and Frey; while others, though ranking as major gods, were merely personifications of different kinds of human activity, like Bragi, the god of eloquence and poetry, or Forseti, the god of justice and legal arrangements. The great stories that grew up about divine beings introduced prominent figures like Frigg, the consort of Odin, or Freya, the sister of Frey; others, like Hermod and Skirnir, were virtually servants, and still others, like Idunn, the wife of Bragi, or Nanna, the wife of Balder, were of distinctly minor importance. There were also the powerful Norns, the fate-goddesses, and the Valkyries, who brought slain warriors to the joys of Valhalla. But the Northern imagination went much further than this; it peopled the world with beings who were the embodiments of the elementary manifestations of Nature, — the winds, the sea, the streams, the woods, the night, the day, and so forth. Frequently the name of the divinity was identical with that of the element which he was supposed to rule, as Drifa for the snowdrift,

Jokull for the ice, or Frosti for the frost. Such rude elementary beings were often conceived as giants or dwarfs, who came into conflict with the major gods, when the latter controlled or interfered with their own activities. Hence the frequent tales of strife between gods and giants or gods and elves, in which the less powerful beings are subdued by greater divinities like Odin and Thor.<sup>1</sup>

This general situation is familiar to students of primitive beliefs and cults and of later literature preserving relics of earlier conditions. Classical mythology offers analogies, not only in the way that the major gods were conceived, but in the multitude of lesser deities representing forces of nature or states of culture. The highly developed civilization of Egypt retained strange survivals of early and crude worship in its beast- and bird-headed gods and goddesses. Modern African and South Sea Island tribes reveal similar highly developed polytheistic systems. To the ignorant and superstitious man the world over, the universe is alive with warring forces, good and evil. As he advances in culture and enlightenment, these forces are still familiar, but they have lost something of their earlier power to terrorize and to charm. What keeps them alive most of all, perhaps, is the tales about them that have been transmitted from generation to generation, constantly changing, but growing no less absorbing through the

passage of years. In the later stages of culture, represented by the Homeric epics, the Eddic poems, and the extant monuments of Egyptian civilization, artistry has modified, refined, and systematized earlier crudities of belief, but not wholly concealed them.

Mythology is not static, but constantly changing, like language, and it is therefore impossible to arrange it, for the Germanic peoples, according to any set scheme. Odin,— the West-Germanic Woden,— the chief divinity of all, is probably a relatively late figure, who has displaced Tyr, the war-god, the analogue of the Greek Zeus, who has himself sunk to a secondary place. Thor, the thunder-god, early identified with vegetation-cults, has been largely superseded in that rôle by Frey, a divinity from another race of gods, the Vanir,— perhaps another cult which was amalgamated with that of the *Æsir*,— and his functions specialized in other directions. Foreign influences must be reckoned with; there are obvious confusions with classical and Christian conceptions. We sometimes find Odin identified with Mercury, and Thor with Jupiter, while Balder, the god of radiant innocence and light, has been much influenced by the figure of Christ. Each deity, then, calls for a separate investigation, and his varying functions and shifting popularity are likely to make a long and intricate story.

In many cases the activities of these deities, great and small, are clear allegories of the processes of nature or the stages of human culture, just as in classical times the alternation of winter and summer was symbolized by the tale of Proserpina and Pluto, or the arts of the metal worker embodied in the activity of Vulcan. To the Egyptians the passage of the sun through the heavens appeared as the voyage of the god Ra, encountering on his way the demons of night and darkness. In other cases, however, the stories told of the gods are not to be interpreted clearly as allegories; perhaps the allegory never existed, perhaps it has become so clouded in the mists of time as to be unintelligible. This is especially the case with minor deities, and with heroes possessed of supernormal powers. The constant tendency to confuse the heroic with the divine led to endowing mortals with supernatural attributes, and to the telling of stories of mortal adventures with supernatural embellishments. Not every contest between a god and a giant necessarily meant the warring of opposed forces of nature; not every adventure involving the supernatural is to be interpreted allegorically. And it must be remembered that a story may be transferred to other figures, and the activity of the original god or hero, which first gave it significance, forgotten.

Here, then, is the crux of the whole problem of the investigation of supernatural elements in stories that have come down from primitive sources. The task of the scholar is to distinguish sharply between beings with supernatural attributes who can be definitely set down as mythological, with clearly defined functions, and those who cannot safely be so regarded, who may be merely heroes to whom the aura of the marvellous has been transferred. Furthermore, his task is to distinguish between those supernatural tales which are clearly allegories, and those which cannot definitely be so interpreted, even though the allegory may once have existed. Later conceptions must be discounted; a subtler meaning may have later been attached to an old story which had in the beginning no such significance; the "mythological" quality may be secondary and not fundamental. Conservatism is safest; there is great danger of imagining that a legend had a deeper meaning than the evidence really warrants.

*Beowulf* offers admirable illustrations of these general considerations. For Scyld, the son of Scef, the founder of the Scylding or Danish royal line, the ancestor of Hrothgar, builder of the mead-hall, a supernatural origin and allegorical significance may be safely claimed. But his attributes are borrowed rather than original, and he himself is a secondary and relatively late creation. The situa-

tion is complicated, but after years of patient study and discussion its main outlines have become fairly clear. Scyld is a personification, as his name "Shield" suggests, of warlike qualities, the defence of the realm. The pretty story in the opening lines of the epic confirms this. When the Danes were forlorn and apprehensive, lacking a king,—the most miserable of all conditions for a Germanic people,—there came drifting to their shores a little child alone in a boat. They accepted him as their king, and when he grew to man's estate he justified his kingship, subduing neighboring peoples and forcing them to pay tribute. After his death he was again laid upon the bosom of a vessel richly decked with weapons and precious objects, and sent forth over the waters whence he came (1-52).

Scyld is called "Scefing" or "son of Scef," a name which, meaning "sheaf," immediately suggests a vegetation-deity. Apparently Scef was regarded by the Scandinavians as a good father for Scyld, a combination that was assisted by the alliteration of the two names. In early mythology, children did not necessarily inherit the characteristics of their fathers; a vegetation-deity might easily be conceived as begetting a warlike son. The warlike Scyld was, as we shall see, given by the Anglo-Saxons a corn-deity, Beow, as a son. Scyld and Scef (or Sceaf) were probably quite in-

dependent of each other in the beginning. Both figures were used by the Anglo-Saxons in their royal genealogies, but not as father and son. Some versions of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* inform us that Scef was the child of Noah, and born in the Ark! While both Anglo-Saxons and Danes used, to a considerable extent, the same figures in the genealogies of their early kings, they did not do this consistently — persons and relationships change. It seems likely that Scyld was a being born of an epithet rather than of a god, that his name and personality were derived from the term “scyldingas” (“shield-men”), applied to the Danes, and later used as a name for a dynasty. The suffix *-ing* may mean either “possessed of” or “descended from.” Consequently the shift in meaning from “shield-men” to “sons of the shield,” or “sons of Shield,” was natural, and the creation of a mythical founder of the line, Scyld, was easy. Such a process was not uncommon. The founder of the royal line of the Volsungs, called in *Beowulf* Wæls (897), was later in Scandinavia known as Volsung, whose name was derived from that of his people.

No one, surely, will doubt the essentially “mythological” character of Scef and Scyld. But if further evidence is needed, we can study the boat-story. This is told, in significant forms, by two later writers in England, but not of Scyld. Scef or Sceaf is the hero — the variation in the vowel

is not significant. The monk Ethelwerd, who composed a chronicle in the late tenth century, and William of Malmesbury, in his *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, in the first half of the twelfth century, agree in giving the adventure to the elder figure. William says that Scef arrived in *quandam insulam Germaniae Scandzam* (a territory over which Hrothgar ruled in *Beowulf*, comprising the southern tip of the Swedish peninsula, and probably Danish lands to the south, but here mentioned as if one island), a child in a boat with a sheaf of wheat beneath his head—*puerulus posito ad caput frumenti manipulo, dormiens*. In general we shall find that *Beowulf* preserves stories in their earlier form better than documents several centuries later. But in this case it appears that the tale first belonged to a harvest-deity or a vegetation-deity, and that later confusions arose from its transference to Scyld. No version except *Beowulf* tells the boat-story of Scyld. But the effect of this transference is obvious in Ethelwerd's account. He says that Scef arrived at an island of the ocean called Scani, in a boat, surrounded by weapons (*armis circumdatus*). The primitive notion of the bringing of the blessings of fertility to a people was thus blended with the bestowal of prowess in war, producing, in Ethelwerd's chronicle, a picture that is mythologically inconsistent.<sup>2</sup>

The mysterious fructifying powers of vegetation have of course been allegorized in the imagination of primitive peoples all over the world. Nothing is commoner; the superstitions of obscure African tribes often recall vividly the early conditions with which we are dealing here. And in a study of these conditions the personifications of the spirit of the corn or grain which may be observed in modern folk-customs in Western Europe are most illuminating. Readers of *The Golden Bough* will remember the strange connections between the ancient rites in honor of Adonis and Cybele and Attis, on the one hand, and modern peasant and savage customs on the other. When the country folk of Germany or Russia fashion the last sheaf of the harvest into the rude semblance of a woman, dress it up, sing around it, and carry it in procession, they are continuing a custom that reaches back into the pagan worship of the fertilizing power of the corn. Especially to be noted is the fact that the fetich is frequently moved about from one place to another, in a car or wagon. The spirit resident in the last sheaf is supposed to exercise a fructifying influence upon vegetation or even upon the child-bearing of women. Sometimes this is symbolized by scattering the grain of the last sheaf. The sheaf itself is identified with the divinity supposedly resident in it. So in the beliefs that we have just been examining in connection with *Beo-*

*wulf*, "Sheaf" is at once the name of the god and of his habitat. A survival of some of these very beliefs may explain picturesque harvest customs in England and Scotland to-day. Their significance as propitiating or invoking the powers of reproduction in nature is doubtless largely forgotten in the rustic merry-making of modern times, but for the student of folk-lore or comparative religion their most unconsidered details often recall long-forgotten pagan rites.<sup>3</sup>

A particularly strange bit of evidence occurs in the English *Chronicles of Abingdon*. In the reign of King Edmund, in the middle of the tenth century, the monks of Abingdon claimed certain disputed lands on the bank of the Thames. They decided to settle the matter by putting a sheaf of wheat on a round shield, with a lighted candle on the sheaf, and observing the movements of the shield as it was borne downstream by the flood. A few of the brethren followed in a small boat. The shield indicated the territory belonging to the monks very clearly by its irregular course, *quasi digito demonstrans*. This was hardly a judgment of God, but rather of the heathen sheaf-god, who might naturally be supposed to preside over the fortunes of the broad Thames meadows. The association of the shield with the sheaf is at first glance striking, but it is probably a pure accident, of no significance. What is noteworthy is the ap-

peal to the deity of vegetation, personified by the sheaf of wheat.<sup>4</sup>

When we look for evidence of the worship of fructifying deities in early Germanic times we find much that is important for the Sceaf-Scyld story. Tacitus tells in the *Germania* of the singular rites of the worship of Nerthus, the "earth-mother," the goddess of fertility who dwelt on an island in the sea. In a sacred grove stood her car, which only her priest might touch. She was identical with the male god, Njord, in Scandinavian mythology; the difference in gender appears to rest upon linguistic change, the passage of certain feminine nouns into the masculine gender, rather than upon a change in personality or function. The conceptions of sex shift readily in many of the more primitive mythological figures; either a male or a female deity could represent the reproductive power of nature, the complementary sex being supplied by a priest or a priestess, as the case might be. Frey, the principal god of fertility in the Scandinavian pantheon, was the son of Njord. He rode the ship *Skidbladnir* ("the cloud"), and dwelt at Noatun ("ship-haven"). The fertilizing rains of spring were in his power. He was sometimes identified with Ing, an ancient and obscure figure venerated by the Danes, hence the epithet "Ing-wine" or "friends of Ing" (1044, 1319). His name sometimes appears amalgamated with that

of Frey, as Yngvi-Frey. He is mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon *Runic Poem* — which, though late, preserves some early traditions — as having been first seen among the East-Danes, and having departed thence over the waves.<sup>5</sup> Just what this signifies is not plain; but it may well point to a similar story of the bringing of the blessings of agricultural fertility, as in the case of Sceaf. The connection of these vegetation-deities with the sea, with the mention of a car or boat, is striking. Clearly, they were thought of as habitually dwelling elsewhere than in the lands over which their beneficent influence extended, and their journey to those lands was most often made in a boat, since that was the commonest means of travelling any distance in early Germanic times. The car of the goddess Nerthus, in her island home, was in all probability a sea-going vehicle.

New and striking parallels have been brought forward in recent years from Finnish and Lappish sources. These peoples, though not of Germanic stock, appear to have borrowed from the mythology of the Scandinavians, in particular from the cults of Frey and Thor. One of the most arresting instances of this is the activity of a Finnish vegetation-deity, Sämpsä Pellervoainen, who is summoned by the sea-god Ahti in the spring, when the ice breaks up, to bring fertility to the fields, — and also, it would appear, to women. Sämpsä makes

his fructifying journey in a boat, his mother (or sister, or step-mother), who is also his spouse, accompanying him. Finnish legends are chiefly familiar to us through the *Kalevala*, a manufactured epic, put together in the nineteenth century on the basis of old Finnish songs by the poet Lönnrot.<sup>•</sup> In this epic Sämpsä Pellervoinen sows the barren earth after the Creation.

Pellervoinen, earth-begotten,  
Sämpsä, youth of smallest stature,  
Came to sow the barren country,  
Thickly scattering seeds about him.

(*Runo II*, 13-16.)

Verses still current among the Finns, not utilized in the *Kalevala*, present important resemblances to the Sceaf myth. In some of these Sämpsä appears as a boy, sleeping in a boat, upon a heap of corn, with a female relative, and taking "six grains of corn," with which, presumably, the fertilization mysteries were to be accomplished. Whether or not this was borrowed from Germanic sources, it remains important testimony for the assignment to a vegetation-deity of the legend of a boy coming across the waters in a boat, lying asleep on a sheaf of wheat.<sup>6</sup>

In what sense we may safely speak of mythological elements in *Beowulf* will now, perhaps, be clear. Such elements may still be discerned, in faint and rationalized forms, attached to minor

figures antedating the action of the poem. But there is nothing to show that Beowulf, or the other characters contemporaneous with him, are deities masking in the guise of human beings; nor can the adventures in which they engage be interpreted as allegories.

The scholars of earlier generations thought otherwise, however. That a nature-allegory underlies the main plot of *Beowulf* was long held to be too obvious to need proof. The precise details of this allegory were indeed much disputed, but as to the soundness of the general principles involved there was hardly any question until the latter part of the nineteenth century. The theory of the great German scholar Karl Müllenhoff (1818–1884) may be taken as typical. This is of importance not only on account of Müllenhoff's great and deserved reputation, but because it was the earliest systematic and authoritative explanation, the general method of which was long regarded as canonical. It is also beautifully simple and neat, and its main outlines may be described in comparatively few words.<sup>7</sup>

Müllenhoff distinguished three great “adventures” in the poem — the swimming-feat with Breca, the fight with the Grendel kin, and the contest with the dragon — which he regarded as originally activities of a deity, whose adversaries represented the various phases of the destructive

power of the North Sea. In the spring the god overcomes this power, personified by Breca of the Brondingas. He later beats back the raging floods that inundate the Low Countries, represented by Grendel and by his dam (the latter being the depths of the sea). In the autumn he is overcome by the dragon, the victorious stormy winter ocean. It is, then, a "seasons-myth." Each spring the god comes to life, to do battle against the destructive powers of nature; and each autumn he is himself conquered by them. The attachment of the myth to the historical background of Danish and Geatic sovereigns Müllenhoff regarded as late and secondary. He believed that the adventures were earlier told of an Anglo-Saxon deity, called Beow or Beaw (the variation in the diphthong is of little moment), who in early Anglo-Saxon genealogies occupies the place of Beowulf the Dane in the epic as son of Scyld; and that later they were attached, with Beowulf the Dane as intermediary, to Beowulf prince of the Geatas. This general theory had earlier been proposed by the English scholar, Kemble. Further evidence for making Beow the antagonist of Grendel was adduced from a Wiltshire charter of the year 931, in which, in the description of a piece of land, "the enclosure of Beowa" (*beowan hamm*) and "the pool of Grendel" (*grendles mere*) are mentioned.

All this, it will be observed, is a series of unproved hypotheses. There is no evidence that such narratives were told of Beow or Beaw or Beowa; there is no evidence that they were told of Beowulf the Dafe; there is no evidence that the adventures of Beowulf the Dane were transferred to Beowulf the Geat. The occurrence of place-names recalling the deity and the demon in the same locality proves nothing, unless there is some strong antecedent reason for connecting the two. The whole theory hangs in the air, a creation of the imagination. But so great was Müllenhoff's prestige that there were few to dispute him. Eduard Sievers, perhaps the greatest Germanic scholar of his generation, writing in 1895, said:

I may, I suppose, regard it as admitted that Beowulf the Geat was not originally the hero of the dragon-saga, but Beowulf the Scylding, the father of Healdene, or rather the Scylding Beow or Beowa of the genealogies and place-names, whose name was secondarily supplanted in our epic by the name Beowulf.<sup>8</sup>

Other investigators, while not questioning the general processes used by Müllenhoff, produced new interpretations of the supposed myth. Laistner identified Grendel—the monster stalking through miasmatic mists at evening, and crunching the bones of his victims with his teeth—as the pestilence, which racks men's bones with fever. His adversary would then be a wind-god, blowing

away such poisonous vapors. Boer believed Grendel to be "the terror of the long winter nights," and his divine opponent a light-god. E. H. Meyer spoke for storms and a lightning-god. Brandl stressed the agricultural attributes of Grendel, and suggested that he may perhaps signify "corn-grinding, the work of slaves, the sign of the conquered foe." Still other scholars perceived in Grendel a whale, or a werewolf, or even our old friend, the Lernæan hydra.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps these ingenious guesses — more than one of them — have some measure of truth in them. The original conception of Grendel may have been connected with some of the darker manifestations of nature, or these may have been attached to him as the tale of his depredations was repeated by generation after generation. But it all lies too far in the mists of the past for analysis. And even if such an allegorical quality did attach itself to Grendel, that does not mean that his victorious opponent must be a deity. Supernatural demons of darkness or mist or pestilence may be slain by a mortal hero. The reason why mythological hypotheses were so readily received is really that this method of interpreting popular literature, and artistic literature based on traditional sources, was a widely accepted fashion among scholars. Müllenhoff's methods were not original with him; he applied what he had learned from others, which

also happened to be regarded as sound doctrine throughout his lifetime, and applied it in an alluring and authoritative manner. The work of later "comparative mythologists" who never set themselves to analyzing *Beowulf* will be found of much assistance in comprehending the criticism of the Anglo-Saxon epic. They examined the names of the personages in a given story, and then, taking into account the evidence of related Indo-European languages, interpreted the whole allegorically, aided by study of similar myths among other peoples. So Max Müller, the celebrated German professor resident at Oxford, explained classic myths. The insubstantiality of the results of these operations became gradually visible to clearer-eyed scholars, however. It is especially disquieting that the mythologists themselves so often disagree as to the meaning of a myth. They cannot all be right. Which man shall be believed? We may apply to *Beowulf* Andrew Lang's sharp criticism of interpretations of the classical myth of Cronos.

He may be Time, or perhaps he is the Summer Heat, and a horned god, or he is the harvest god, or the god of storm and darkness, or the midnight sky,—the choice is wide; or he is the lord of dark and light, and his children are the stars, the clouds, the summer-months, the light-powers, or what you will. The mythologist has only to make his selection.<sup>10</sup>

Very disquieting for the supporters of mythological interpretations of the adventures of Beo-

wulf is the fact that these do not really fit the descriptions in the poem. If Grendel personifies the wintry sea, and his dam the depths of the sea, how does it happen that they dwell in a quiet inland pool, which is described in considerable detail in one of the finest passages in the poem (1345-1376), and is confirmed as the original and not the secondary location by Scandinavian parallels? This whole matter will be discussed in the following chapter. Again, a dragon flying about in the air, and spewing fire over the countryside, does not suggest to the skeptical mind the destructive power of inundating water. The parallel to Thor's fight with the World-Serpent, which lies at the bottom of the sea, with his tail in his mouth, suggested by Müllenhoff, simply does not exist; there is no resemblance between the two stories. Still more fatal to the notion that Beowulf's exploits are a seasons-myth is the death of the dragon. When the winter-demon kills the summer-god he ought not to die too; he ought to live triumphant over his adversary, wielding uncontrolled power over the wintry sea.<sup>11</sup>

How, then, if Müllenhoff's elaborate theory be rejected, are we to account for a Beowulf as son of Scyld in the epic, where Beow or Beaw appears in the English genealogies? Neither Beow nor Beowulf occurs as son of Scyld in lists of early Scandinavian kings.

It seems probable that Beow or Beaw was a vegetation-hero or deity (Anglo-Saxon, *bēow*, "corn," "grain"), who had attained some popularity among the West-Germanic tribes. We know nothing of his exploits; his name may be identical with that of the Finnish Pekko ("barley"). Little is known of Pekko, either, but he seems a good deal like Sämpsä Pellervoainen; he comes from the corn-heap in the spring as a little child. Now, since the Anglo-Saxons made Beow the son of Scyld (Sceldwa) in enumerating the ancestors of their own kings, it is natural to suppose that they might also do this in setting forth the early sovereigns of the Danish house in *Beowulf*. That the name Beowulf occupies the position that Beowa should have in the epic, as son of Scyld, is probably due to the carelessness of a scribe, writing by mistake the similar-sounding and familiar name of the hero of the poem. It is possible, of course, that such a confusion might have arisen earlier, in oral transmission of the material. That the poet of *Beowulf*, expert as he was in the ramifications of story-telling, should be guilty of it, seems less likely.

Thus far we have not considered the episode in which Beowulf swims the icy sea of winter with Breca, prince of the Brondingas (499-606). This was regarded by the mythologists as of high significance. Müllenhoff put his view plainly: the

hero "swam against the polar current, and may therefore be regarded as a mythical person, a divine being friendly to mankind, who in his youth, that is, the spring, subdues the violence and wildness of the wintry sea, overcoming its stormy character. This is represented by his rival or fellow-swimmer Breca." Other scholars cherished different views. To Sarrazin, Beowulf was a sun-god who "swims faster than all other beings; the dashing sea-wave (*breki*) cannot contend with him; he overtakes it very quickly." Brandl calls the episode "the depiction of a natural phenomenon in human terms; the South-Scandinavian sea is broken up and kept open in winter by the wind; in Western Norway the Gulf Stream gives clear water for sailing." Whether Breca is an opponent or companion of Beowulf, then, the incident has been held to represent the victory over the ocean of a divine power or of a personified force of nature.

A review of the story is important for its own sake, entirely apart from its supposed mythological significance.<sup>12</sup> Oddly enough, it has been pretty generally misunderstood. It is one of the finest pieces of narrative in the epic,—rapid, vigorous, and dramatic, and without the misuse of rhetorical devices so common in Anglo-Saxon poetry. There is no mystery about it; the meaning is plain enough on a careful examination. Perhaps it formed the

subject of a separate epic lay, before it was utilized by the *Beowulf* poet. Objection has been made by Klaeber that the "disrespectful treatment of Beowulf contrasts strangely with the dignified courtesy reigning at Hrothgar's court." But the dramatic effectiveness of the contrast is evident, and a good opportunity is thus afforded for the poet to introduce into his tale an account of one of his hero's earlier exploits. If Unferth's manners seem to indicate a lapse from the high standard prevailing at the court of Hrothgar, they must be looked upon as an inheritance from the older legends which had come down from a ruder age. But the very nature of the episode justifies them; they could not be made wholly elegant without spoiling the tale, and the poet has carefully motivated Unferth's resentment.

Unferth, the son of Ecglaf, and the chief counsellor of the king, is, as we have seen already, a trouble-maker. In the midst of the feasting at Hrothgar's court on the evening of Beowulf's arrival, he drinks too much, and his ill-temper increases. It irritates him that a distinguished foreigner has come to slay the demon which no Dane has been able to dispose of: "he could not bear that any man should perform more deeds of glory than he had himself accomplished." So he attacks Beowulf bitterly, accusing him of having engaged in a contest in swimming with Breca of the

Brondingas, and of having been worsted by him. "He overcame you in swimming; he had greater strength." And furthermore: "All his boast against you did the son of Beanstan"—that is, Breca—"in very truth accomplish." Finally, Unferth prophesies Beowulf's defeat in the coming contest with Grendel. \*

Beowulf, retorting calmly, but with superb effect, gives Breca the lie direct, accuses him of having drunk immoderately, recalls a disgraceful episode in his past life, when he murdered his kin, or failed in his duty to his clan, and remarks that, if he were as brave as he thinks, there would be no need to fear the onslaughts of Grendel. Moreover, Beowulf relates — and this is the most interesting part of his speech — the swimming adventure as it actually happened, vindicating his own prowess. All this disposes effectively of Unferth; the incident is closed. The next morning, when Beowulf enters the hall in triumph, bearing the arm and claw of the monster as trophies, the poet remarks grimly that "the son of Ecglaf was pretty silent."

The first point that Beowulf makes in his speech is that he had "greater strength on the water, greater power to endure hardships on the waves, than any other man." Secondly, it was not a race at all; Breca could not swim faster than he, and he had no wish to be separated from Breca. The whole was the mutual performance of a difficult

feat, a boyish and foolhardy business, to be sure, but not like Unferth's account of it. "We two boys — for we were still in the time of our youth — vowed and made a brag that we would risk our lives on the sea, and we did it, too." The danger was in the wintry sea, swept with storms, and concealing hideous monsters in its depths. The whole affair was primarily a trial of endurance, then, like the exploit of Grettir the Strong and his friend Bjorn, who swam at a single time the whole course of the Hitara River from the lake where it rose to the sea. According to Shakespeare, the same kind of adventure was undertaken by Cæsar and Cassius.

For once, upon a raw and gusty day,  
The troubled Tiber chafing with her shores,  
Cæsar said to me: "Dar'st thou, Cassius, now  
Leap in with me into this angry flood,  
And swim to yonder point?" Upon the word,  
Accoutred as I was, I plunged in  
And bade him follow; so, indeed, he did.  
The torrent roar'd, and we did buffet it  
With lusty sinews, throwing it aside  
And stemming it with hearts of controversy.

We are not told what the goal of Beowulf and Breca was, if indeed there was any goal at all. Their plans were upset by rough weather, which drove them apart. Beowulf came to shore in the land of the Finns, and Breca (so Unferth says) among the Heatho-Ræmas, a name surviving in the modern district of Romerike in Norway, near

Oslo. Nor do we know the point at which they started. Beowulf never claims that he outstripped or out-distanced Breca, but that he endured the greater hardships; he was forced to encounter sea-monsters. One of them he slew at the bottom of the sea, and nine others lay dead in the light of the morning on the surface. Never has he heard of a tougher fight than that, he says, or of a man in harder straits. Neither Breca nor Unferth ever accomplished anything like that in battle-play.

It should be noted that the exploit was preceded by a formal boast, made by both Beowulf and Breca. This custom of vowing, in good set terms, to do a deed that could not in honor be abandoned, is too familiar to need comment; note Beowulf's speeches before his contests with Grendel and Grendel's dam, and the dragon. These "brags" sometimes involved emulation with another hero, which was just the reason why Unferth's slander, that Breca tried to surpass Beowulf and accomplished his boast, was dangerous and plausible. Observe how differently Beowulf himself puts the matter. It was a mutual feat of strength. "*We asserted that we would risk our lives on the ocean, and we did it.*" Two or more men might brag that they would engage in a hazardous exploit, and succeed or fail as comrades. In the *Saga of the Jomsvikings*, Sigwald promises a dangerous deed:

As a great drinking-horn was brought to him, he stood up, took the horn, and said: "I vow to sail to Norway and attack Jarl Hakon before the third winter from this, and not to return until I have killed the Jarl or driven him out of the country, and if I have not it will be because I have lost my life." . . . Then the king called out: "Now it is your turn, O Thorkell Hafi, to speak! What will you vow to undertake? You must be bold and courageous!" "I vow," answered Thorkell, "to follow my brother Sigwald, and not to flee sooner than he, as long as I see the prow of his ship and the oars ready for action, in case he fights on the water with Jarl Hakon; but if he engages with him on shore, I will not retreat until I can see Sigwald no more in the thick of the fight, and his banner is behind me." "That was well spoken," said the king, "and you will no doubt accomplish it, for you are a doughty hero! Now it is your turn to speak, Bui Digrí! We know that you will have something worthy of a man to promise, for you are rightly called the mightiest of heroes." Bui said: "This vow do I make, that I will fare northwards with Jarl Sigwald and follow him in this expedition as long as my endurance permits, and not flee from Jarl Hakon until fewer of our men remain than have fallen, and I will hold out as long as Sigwald will have me."

As to the origin of the Breca episode, nothing is known. It seems likely that it was a purely imaginary incident, invented to exalt Beowulf as a swimmer and a fighter of monsters, rather than an actual occurrence. Breca is probably as fictitious as Beowulf. He is mentioned in *Widsith* (25) as Breoca, ruling over the Brondingas, but this does

not necessarily mean that he or his people ever existed, any more than King "Thyle" of the "Rondingas"—almost certainly epic personifications of "the orator" and "the warriors." Breca and the Brondingas were perhaps named after the "breaking" of the waves (Old Norse, *breki*) and the dashing of the sea (cf. modern German *Brandung*), but they are not on that account to be set down as personifications of the power of the ocean, to be viewed through the perspective of a nature-allegory. Nothing is said of them in the poem or elsewhere that would lead to such a conclusion.

In what sense mythology may be traced in *Beowulf* will now be plain. Relics of the veneration of vegetation-deities appear to have affected the figures of the early Danish kings, looming up vaguely through the mists of antiquity. Their divine attributes have, however, been almost wholly obscured by the passage of years, the inclination to rationalize, and the exaltation of other qualities, like success in war. On the other hand, no such attributes can be discerned in the main personages of the poem, Beowulf and those represented as contemporaneous with him, nor can their exploits be interpreted as allegories of the phenomena of nature or of states of culture. The chief reason for this conclusion is the total absence of convincing evidence, internal or external, and the unsatisfactory way in which allegorical hypotheses

thus far proposed fit the events of the action. It may well be, however, that the allegory, if it had ever been present, would have become so altered in the course of time as to be distorted and unrecognizable. If the investigator, from his study of the general processes of early poetry, believes that a mythological foundation *must* underlie the action, there is no way of proving that he is wrong. But unless new evidence appears, there is no way for him to prove that he is right, or to explain the faded allegory convincingly. Something more than a purely imaginative reconstruction is necessary.

It is surprisingly easy to fit a nature-allegory into any simple story. One may say, for example, that he believes the nursery rhyme about Jack and Jill to be really of high antiquity, based upon an ancient day-and-night myth. Jack is the sun-god (cf. Latin *jaculum*, "javelin," "spear"—the spear-like rays of the sun); he climbs the hill of the heavens, but falls down and breaks his crown (the setting of the sun and the spreading of its rays in all directions at sunset). Jill is a feminine divinity, the moon-goddess, who also climbs the heavens, and "comes tumbling after" the sun, as the moon sets after sunset is long past. The "pail of water" is the dew, which falls upon the earth at evening, although it might also be interpreted as evening or morning showers.

This is no more absurd than much serious mythologizing has been. But the foundations of such processes no longer stand unchallenged and secure. Müllenhoff prefaced his work with the dogma that "every epic narrative [*Sage*] and the contents of every popular epic, consists of two elements, myth and history." This dogma is canonical no longer in the sense in which he meant it. Guidance in regard to the supernatural elements in *Beowulf* must be sought in definite external evidence of a very different sort, which is set forth in the two chapters that follow.

## VI

### GRENDEL AND HIS DAM

H EATHENISM," says Santayana, "is a good word. It conveys, as no other word can, the sense of vast multitudes tossing in darkness, harassed by demons of their own choice."<sup>1</sup> Of such origin, no matter what we conceive their significance to have been, were the monsters in *Beowulf*, pagan incarnations of joyless evil. Their attributes embody what men most feared in the world about, — the strength of the bear, the poison of the serpent, the swooping attack of the eagle, the hideous destruction of fire, the mysteries of lonely waters, the nameless terror that walketh in darkness. The imagination of countless generations has moulded them; they are not merely personifications of some one aspect of nature or of physical life, but composites, revealing, even in the artistic and formal treatment of epic, something of their complicated ancestry.

The Grendel brood are in some respects more interesting than the dragon, because rarer in European story-telling. They are pagan in origin, beyond a doubt, but Christian and Hebrew tradition have lent them new terrors, in connecting

them with Cain and the devils spawned as his descendants. It seems doubtful, however, if they owe to those traditions their half-human shape. In their latest guise, they are almost to be reckoned as bear-demons, so much have they taken on the aspect of that dreaded animal. And the bear is a <sup>2</sup>beast that walks like a man. Brute and hero share common characteristics in early times; the ambition of the slayer was to possess qualities as terrible as those of the beasts that he overcame. In days when mere physical strength served men best it was natural to believe that drinking the blood or eating the heart of a wild animal would give its strength and courage. So Beowulf, whose very name appears to mean "bear," has the super-human strength, the prowess in wrestling, which match him evenly with a demon like Grendel.<sup>2</sup> When the antecedents of Grendel and his *dam* are examined, however, it becomes clear that they are only secondarily bear-monsters. Earlier, they were water-demons. So much of this, indeed, still remains in the epic that Müllenhoff and others, as will be remembered, made it the point of departure for mythological hypotheses. But Müllenhoff was quite mistaken in the nature of the demons. They are not spirits of the vasty deep, but of inland waters. A study of Scandinavian analogues shows that they were earlier conceived to be waterfall-trolls, and this is still observable

in the Anglo-Saxon. Etymology further bears it out: Grendel used to be connected with *grindan*, "grind," and the monster explained as "the grinder," who crushes his enemy, bear-fashion, in his powerful teeth. More convincing, however, is the connection of the word *grendel* with *grund*, the depths or bottom of a body of water. It is there that Grendel and his dam may be found (cf. *grund-hyrdē*, 2136; *grund-wong*, 1496, etc.; *mere-grund*, 2100, etc.). The name Grendel appears to survive in English place-names, which can be traced in Anglo-Saxon documents, and it is noticeable that these localities are not near the sea, but inland regions — *grindeles pytt* (a "pit" filled with water?); *grendles mere* ("pool"); *gryndeles sylle* ("swamp"); *grindles bec* ("brook"). Examination of these places as they exist to-day confirms this. In a marsh or lake, then, in the mysterious depths below, it would appear that a water-monster, a *grendel*, was supposed to dwell. We shall see later how this English conception has supplanted that of the waterfall-troll, producing in *Beowulf* a curiously mixed and inconsistent idea of the demon dwellings. Perhaps the word *grendel* was a generic term for a water-monster; perhaps the localities just mentioned were named with the Grendel of the Beowulf tale in mind; who can tell? In Shakespeare's day, hobgoblins were called "pucks" ("as I am *an* honest Puck," "else *the*

Puck a liar call"); but we, and very likely those who saw *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on Shakespeare's stage, have felt that "Puck" is almost as distinctive a personal appellation as Robin Goodfellow.<sup>3</sup>

The Grendel of the epic, at any rate, is very much of an individual; in no other tale does a devastating monster of his name appear. And his "mother" is of equal importance. The story told of them contains very marked and individual features which set it apart and relate it to similar stories in various parts of the world. These narratives, for the most part popular tales, preserve a recognizable framework of incident which recurs again and again, no matter how widely separated the tellings may be in time and place. Very strange, too, are the correspondences in details, which link a version in Japan with one in Germany, perhaps, or one in Iceland with another in India. While Grendel is not a type, then, like the dragon, he and his dam are central figures in a type-story, which is not confined to European territory. It is clear from these tales that the adventure with the mother of Grendel is not a later elaboration of the Grendel-contest, as scholars used to think; it is an integral part of the type-story.

The killing of Grendel and his dam is the kernel of the epic, the central theme of all the earlier

action. It has been much altered by its connection with the Scandinavian royal houses, and by courtly and religious influences, but its essential simplicity and its naïve and "popular" character are evident. If we would pluck out the heart of its mystery, we must disregard non-essentials, and listen to it as a tale told among simple people with childlike imaginations. The more aristocratic circles which have felt its spell also have their testimony to give. For it has pushed its way (not, of course, in just the form in which it appears in *Beowulf*) into historical and legendary narratives, attaching itself both to real and to imaginary heroes. In such folk-tales and narratives we have something tangible upon which to base conclusions as to the history of the materials in *Beowulf*, not, like the web of the nature-mythologists, a fabric spun out of the gossamer of imagination.

It is important to emphasize at this point that the dragon-story was originally entirely separate from the adventure with the two demons in the haunted hall and beneath the water. Never, except in *Beowulf*, has it been found connected with those adventures. In a few of the variants of the type-story to which the Grendel-fight belongs, the terrors of the subterranean adventure are increased by introducing a dragon or dragons, but these do not suggest the closing episode of *Beowulf*, while the folk-tales and other narratives which do

show vague resemblances to the dragon-fight in the epic present no incidents analogous to the Grendel-contests. This is very significant. The mythologists assumed that the Grendel and dragon episodes were parts of one and the same early myth. This assumption, which, as we have seen, is improbable for other reasons, is again contradicted by the evidence of popular story. If these two themes had originally been united, we should expect traces of this connection to survive in later times.

The importance of systematic study of *märchen*, both for their own sake and for the light that they throw upon sophisticated literature, has long been recognized. Only in comparatively recent times, however, has such study fully come into its own. Scholars busy with the reconstructions of comparative mythology were sometimes inclined to look with disdain upon those who collected nursery tales and professed to draw serious conclusions from studying them. Yet the beginnings of the long trails which lead through the forest of folktales were blazed long since, under the stimulus of the awakened interest in early literature in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The *Household Tales* of the brothers Grimm, published in 1812-1815, cleared out an immense amount of timber, and opened up vistas to other workers. The learned and suggestive comments of the

Grimms revealed plainly the great significance of such tales for literary origins, and inspired others to make collections in other fields. As the century advanced, a similar service was done for Danish ballads by Grundtvig, whose edition (published 1851-1890) was the model used by Professor Child in his great collection of English and Scottish ballads (1882-1898). Anthropology and folk-lore lent their aid; it was perceived that knowledge of the early beliefs and imaginative processes of mankind are best understood by studying the survivals that have come down to modern times, and observing the habits of peoples in a similar grade of culture to-day. It is hard to classify scholars satisfactorily according to their theories. Mannhardt (1831-1880), for example, who began as a meteorological mythologist, broke sharply away and became a pioneer in investigating popular customs and superstitions, and explaining their true significance. He was not without distinguished followers in Germany, while England also produced an extremely able group of scholars — Tylor, Frazer, Andrew Lang, E. S. Hartland, Alfred Nutt, and others. The classical example of the folk-loristic method, Frazer's *Golden Bough*, probing in minute fashion the worship of the Arician Diana, points a suggestive way to the elucidation of primitive custom in *Beowulf*. But our concern must rather be with the assis-

tance given by folk-tales in explaining the supernatural episodes in the epic.

The nursery tales with which we are all most familiar do not represent popular material in its purity; they have been considerably modernized and altered. Those that we remember best—*Cinderella*, *Hop o' my Thumb*, *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and the like—have been much influenced by the fancy of Charles Perrault, who gave to them the airs and graces of the court of Louis XIV, which loved to take even its shepherds and milkmaids as creations of art rather than of nature. In the *Household Tales* of the Grimms the truer estate of these old stories may be seen—the simple and sometimes even crude and vulgar forms which they assumed when they were the possession and delight of the people, a part of the stock of traditional narrative handed down orally from generation to generation. The first thing necessary in studying folk-tales is to eliminate “literary” accretions. We are then in a position to estimate properly the influence that they have exercised in earlier days upon more sophisticated narratives.<sup>4</sup>

Consider *Cinderella*, one of the most widespread and beloved of all tales, which may be examined in its popular forms, as varied and shifting as the combinations in a kaleidoscope, in the great collection issued by the British Folk-Lore Society. Its

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incidents were readily attached to heroines, real or imaginary, who had a more dignified place in story-telling. When we read, in the Old Norse sagas which bears his name, of the marriage of the Viking chief, Ragnar Lothbrok, to a beautiful girl, brought up in squalor and poverty, who satisfied his bridal tests, we recognize the central incident of the Cinderella *märchen*. The episode of the slipper is told of King Rother, an historical Lombard king of the seventh century, whose fortunes were retold centuries later, with imaginative elaborations. Historic tradition, passing into legend, borrows, of course, only such elements from popular tales as it chooses, omitting and adapting with the utmost freedom. The story of the Sleeping Beauty in the Wood, foreshadowed in an Egyptian papyrus of the Twentieth Dynasty, attached itself to Sigurd and Brynhild, and became one of the central features of their legend. Sigurd rides through the fire to rescue Brynhild, just as the prince penetrates the encircling hedge of the magic castle, and wakes the warrior-maiden plunged into slumber by the sleep-thorn of Odin, which we recognize as the spindle of the old crone in the tower in the nursery version. Sigurd and Brynhild were themselves imaginary characters, but they were given reality and dignity, and their supernatural adventures plausibility, by their connection with historical Burgundian kings of the fifth

## BEOWULF AND EPIC TRADITION

Some three centuries elapsed before the poem attained the extant form in which we now read it. What were its fortunes in the meantime? How often was it recopied and revised, in other parts of Britain? Here evidence fails us; the varied dialectical forms are not, as they have sometimes been considered, trustworthy guides. By a series of fortunate chances, *Beowulf* was spared in the Viking pillagings and burnings, and was ultimately put into the West-Saxon dialect in southern England, where it was copied, not far from the year 1000, by two careless scribes, and made a part of one of the manuscript codices which were the treasured possessions of the learned. The general characteristics of this final written form have been traced in an earlier chapter. The copying took place at a time when the lamp of Anglo-Saxon letters was burning low, when the traditions of native verse were kept alive by little original production, and the English spirit of the older days was enfeebled and irresolute. The age of Æthelred the Redeless was a sorry contrast to the glory of the Anglian kingdoms. Is it fanciful to imagine that the man for whom the final transcript of *Beowulf* was made saw, in its tragic tale of the vanishing splendors of great kingdoms and the extinction of royal houses, a reflection of the misfortunes of the English crown and the dangers assailing his native land, and, in its story of coura-

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geous struggles against heavy odds, a faint hope that his countrymen might win through in the end? The fulfilment was long delayed; but if the heroism of Harold at Hastings came to naught, the indomitable Anglo-Saxon temper so strikingly illustrated in *Beowulf* ultimately prevailed in England over all invaders, and proved the foundation of the greatness of the English nation.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY



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THE following bibliographical suggestions are intended chiefly for those who do not read the poem in the original, or are just beginning a study of the Anglo-Saxon text. Those who are obliged to rely upon translations will find that the editions will give much assistance. It must be remembered that no two translations follow precisely the same textual readings, and that considerable variations thus arise. Several renderings may be profitably examined, since no one of them reproduces the original exactly, although each contributes its share to a correct understanding of meaning, rhythm, and spirit. The oldest ones are better avoided. The prose versions are generally more faithful; those in verse of necessity sacrifice literalness to metrical form. The peculiar movement of Anglo-Saxon poetry is exceedingly difficult to reproduce in modern English. There is unfortunately at present (1928) no literal prose rendering which takes due account of the results of the latest researches.

The critical and illustrative literature is very extensive; much of the best of it is in foreign languages, and intended only for specialists. I have selected some twenty works which seem to me most generally helpful to the serious student. They will be referred to, in the notes following, only by brief titles, or the author's name.

The notes, as I have explained in the Preface, are added for more advanced readers who wish support for statements in the text, and references to special studies elsewhere. I have tried to make them as brief as possible, and only in rare cases have admitted discussion of technical questions.

## EDITIONS

Especially to be recommended are those by A. J. Wyatt and R. W. Chambers, second revised edition, Cambridge, Eng., 1920, and by F. Klaeber, Boston, N. Y., and Chicago, 1922. The first of these should be supplemented by R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf, An Introduction to the Study of the Poem*, Cambridge, Eng., 1921. Klaeber's edition contains an extraordinary amount of concise information. The *Waldhere* fragments, *Deor*, and passages from *Widsith* are included. The edition by W. J. Sedgefield, second edition, Manchester, 1913, which contains text and comment in one volume, has an excellent glossary.

Of the German editions, the following deserve particular mention: Schücking (a revision of the older Heyne-Socin text), tenth edition, Paderborn, 1913, with many passages translated in the glossary; Holthausen, in two small volumes, third edition, Heidelberg, 1912-1913. *Waldhere*, *Deor*, *Widsith*, and the *Lay of Hildebrand* are included.

All the editions mentioned above contain the *Finnsburg Fragment*, with glossary and critical apparatus.

## TRANSLATIONS

Chambers's review of the translations, *Introduction*, pp. 390 ff., including foreign languages as well as English, is especially detailed. See also Klaeber, pp. cxxvi ff. For earlier work, Chauncey B. Tinker, *Translations of Beowulf, a Critical Bibliography*, N. Y., 1903.

F. B. Gummere, *The Oldest English Epic*, N. Y., 1909 (verse), includes *Finnsburg*, *Waldhere*, *Deor*, *Widsith*, and the *Lay of Hildebrand*, with introduction and notes. The spirit and movement of the original are well suggested. J. R. C. Hall, *Beowulf in Modern English Prose*, second

edition, revised, London, 1911, brings out the structure of the epic clearly, and adds some useful illustrative material. The metrical translation by the same author (1914) is not so felicitous, and the illustrations and comment are almost wholly omitted. The prose version by C. B. Tinker, second edition, N. Y., 1910, is simple in style, and the episodes are printed, as in Clark Hall's prose text, in smaller type. The translation by C. G. Child, Riverside Literature Series, Boston, 1904 (prose), is good and inexpensive. The metre of William Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung* is used by Archibald Strong, *Beowulf translated into Modern English Rhyming Verse*, London, 1925, in frank departure from the Anglo-Saxon line. A foreword is provided by R. W. Chambers. The German verse rendering by H. Gering, second edition, Heidelberg, 1913, is excellent, with very good notes.

For illustrative reading in Anglo-Saxon literature the following may be recommended: Cook and Tinker, *Select Translations from Old English Poetry*, Boston, 1902; *Select Translations from Old English Prose*, Boston, 1908; J. D. Spaeth, *Old English Poetry*, Princeton, 1922.

Suggestions for reading in Old Norse literature will be found in the notes to chapter II.

#### FACSIMILE AND CONCORDANCE

The poem was reproduced in facsimile by Zupitza, *Beowulf: Autotypes of the Unique Cotton MS. Vitellius A xv*, etc., Early English Text Society, no. 77, London, 1882. The description of the MS. by K. Sisam, *Modern Language Review* (1916), xi, 335 ff., is very useful.

For ready reference to the Anglo-Saxon text, see A. S. Cook, *A Concordance to Beowulf*, Halle, 1911.

## SELECTED CRITICAL AND ILLUSTRATIVE WORKS

A. Brandl, "Englische Literatur: Angelsächsische Periode," in Paul's *Grundriss der germanischen Philologie* (Strassburg, 1908), ii, 941-1134. The best of all surveys of Anglo-Saxon literature; not adapted, however, to the elementary student. The section dealing with *Beowulf* contains much valuable material.

H. Bradley, article "Beowulf" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, eleventh edition, 1910, vol. iii. Reflects to a considerable extent earlier opinions; not in line with the most advanced research.

S. A. Brooke, *History of Early English Literature*, London and N. Y., 1892. Excellent for literary appreciation, but to be used with caution in scholarly matters.

*Cambridge History of English Literature*, 1907, etc. Vol. i contains various essays on early English literature, of unequal value. The treatment of *Beowulf* by Munro Chadwick embodies theories which are open to question.

H. Munro Chadwick, *Origin of the English Nation*, Cambridge, Eng., 1907. Best for more advanced workers, with discussions of controversial questions; extremely learned and suggestive.

H. Munro Chadwick, *The Heroic Age*, Cambridge, Eng., 1912. Interesting and illuminating comparison of the Germanic and the Greek epic.

R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf, an Introduction to the Study of the Poem, with a discussion of the Stories of Offa and Finn*, Cambridge, Eng., 1921. The most important of all commentaries on *Beowulf*, with full bibliographical and critical apparatus.

R. W. Chambers, *Widsith, A Study in Old English Heroic Legend*, Cambridge, Eng., 1912. A detailed re-

view of the tribes and heroes mentioned in the poem, with discussion of disputed questions. The maps at the end are useful for the study of *Beowulf*.

R. W. Chambers, *England before the Norman Conquest*, London, 1926. "The object is to illustrate the way in which the history of the earliest England has to be constructed." The book consists largely of translations of sources.

Bruce Dickins, *Runic and Heroic Poems of the Old Teutonic Peoples*, Cambridge, Eng., 1915. The volume contains text, translation, and notes for *Waldhere*, the *Finnsburg Fragment*, *Deor*, and the *Lay of Hildebrand*, in addition to the runic poems.

Oliver Elton and F. York Powell, *The First Nine Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus translated*, London, 1894. A convenient English version of this very important text.

Max Förster, *Beowulf-Materialien zum Gebrauch bei Vorlesungen*, Braunschweig, 1908. A convenient collection of important illustrative passages from various sources.

F. B. Gummere, *Germanic Origins*, N. Y., 1892. An account of the life and customs of the Germanic tribes on the Continent. An excellent survey, unfortunately out of print and hard to obtain.

J. Hoops (editor), *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, 4 vols., Strassburg, 1911-1919. Compact and suggestive essays by recognized authorities. Indispensable for the advanced worker.

W. M. Hart, *Ballad and Epic* (Harvard Studies and Notes, vol. xi), Boston, 1907. Elaborate discussion of the types of early narrative verse.

O. L. Jiriczek, *Die deutsche Helden sage* (Sammlung Göschen), fourth revised edition, Berlin and Leipzig,

1913; an earlier edition translated as *Northern Hero Legends* by M. G. Bentinck Smith for the Temple Classics, London, 1902. The later German editions are far superior.

W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance*, London and N. Y., 1897. A delightful and highly suggestive discussion of the literary aspects of early mediæval literature. Particular attention is paid to Old Norse poetry.

W. W. Lawrence, *Medieval Story*, second edition, N. Y., 1926. Discussions of important pieces of mediæval literature, with special reference to the development of social ideals, designed rather for the general reader than the specialist.

R. M. Meyer, *Die altgermanische Poesie*, Berlin, 1889. An older book, with much that is suggestive for the advanced student.

A. Olrik, *Danmarks Heltedigtning*, 2 vols., Copenhagen, 1903, 1910. Very important for detailed study. Vol. i is translated into English as *The Heroic Legends of Denmark*, by L. M. Hollander, N. Y., 1919. Olrik contributed some notes to the translation which are not in the Danish volume.

A. Olrik, *Nordisches Geistesleben in heidnischer und fröhchristlicher Zeit*. Translation from the Danish by W. Ranisch, Heidelberg, 1908.

C. Oman, *England before the Norman Conquest*, N. Y. and London, 1913. An excellent guide to the conditions in England during the development of the material in *Beowulf* into its finished epic form.

F. Panzer, *Studien zur germanischen Sagengeschichte*, I, *Beowulf*, Munich, 1910. An elaborate collection and discussion of folk-tale analogues. Extremely important.

K. Stjerna, *Essays on Questions connected with the Old English Poem of Beowulf*, translated and edited by

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J. R. C. Hall, Coventry, 1912. The arguments advanced are often open to question, but there are valuable illustrations and discussions of armor, jewelry, dwellings, grave-mounds, etc.

Henry Osborn Taylor, *The Mediaeval Mind*, 2 vols., third (American) edition, N. Y., 1919. Admirable for suggesting the general development of thought and expression in mediæval Europe.

R. Wülker, *Grundriss zur Geschichte der angelsächsischen Litteratur*, Leipzig, 1885. A very useful review of earlier criticism. There is no book which performs this service from 1885 to the present time.

Studies by the present writer, containing more extended discussions of matters set forth in the preceding pages, are here listed together for convenience.

"Some Disputed Questions in Beowulf-Criticism," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (1909), xxiv, 220-273.

"The Haunted Mere in Beowulf," *Ibid.* (1912), xxvii, 208-245.

"Beowulf and the Tragedy of Finnsburg," *Ibid.* (1915), xxx, 372-431.

"The Dragon and his Lair in Beowulf," *Ibid.* (1918), xxxiii, 547-583.

(The references above are to the Old Series of the Publications. The New Series subtracts seven from the numeral of the Old Series; thus, xxxiii, O. S., is xxvi, N. S.)

"The Breca Episode in Beowulf," *Anniversary Papers by Colleagues and Pupils of George Lyman Kittredge* (Boston and London, 1913), pp. 359-366.



## NOTES



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### CHAPTER I

1. For Sir William Temple's essay, see Spingarn, *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1909), iii, 94, 95.
2. *The Little Clay Cart* (Cambridge, Mass., 1905), p. xvii.
3. See Brandl, p. 1001, who, however, puts the matter cautiously.
4. See below, pp. 284 ff.
5. A fuller discussion of much in the preceding paragraphs will be found in chapter VIII.
6. Henry Bradley, in "The Numbered Sections in Old English Poetical MSS" (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, London, 1915, vii, 90), suggested that "each section of *Beowulf* represents one of the sheets or leaves on which the poem was written by the man to whom it owes its present literary form . . . it may well have been written on scraps of parchment of various sizes, or on sheets already partially covered by writing. The inequality in the length of the various sections would thus be accounted for."
7. For a review of the principal studies in the "higher criticism" see especially Chambers, *Introduction*, pp. 112-120. The most important of the earlier studies are those of Müllenhoff (1869) and ten Brink (1888). The more recent works by Schücking, *Beowulfs Rückkehr*, 1905, and Berendsohn, 1913 (see Klaeber, p. cxxxix), are different in method, but open to many objections. The formal stylistic adornments of repetition and variation in Anglo-Saxon verse, which are so disturbing to modern feeling, appear to have been carried over into the larger units of narrative. Their importance for the critical reconstruction of *Beowulf* is discussed in an unpublished dissertation (1903) by the present writer, in the Harvard College Library.

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8. For an illuminating comparison of historic fact with imaginative elaboration in the great stories of Germanic antiquity, see A. Heusler, "Geschichtliches und Mythisches in der germanischen Helden sage," *Sitzungsberichte der königlichen preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (1909), xxxvii, 920 ff.

## CHAPTER II

1. That the ancient Lethra and the hall of Hrothgar were located on the site of the modern village of Leire is generally accepted to-day. Dr. S. J. Herben, in a paper read at a meeting of the Modern Language Association of America, in December, 1924, presented a different view. I quote the summary of his paper. "The topographical passages in *Beowulf* do not constitute adequate evidence for assigning the location of Heorot to any definite spot. The identification with the present-day Leire is based upon inconclusive testimony. A combination of archæological, linguistic, and historical material points to a hill top in Viso parish, Smorum district, on the island of Sjælland as the site of Hrothgar's hall." For an early picture of Leire and general discussion, cf. Chambers, *Introduction*, pp. 16 ff.

2. Sarrazin, *Beowulf-Studien* (Berlin, 1888), p. 31.

3. See particularly the accounts in the *Poetic Edda* and the *Volsungasaga* (cf. notes 21, 22, below) and the discussions by Jiriczek (1913), pp. 40 ff., and Chambers, *Widsith*, pp. 15-20.

4. See the important study by Elias Wessén, *De Nordiska Folkstammarna i Beowulf*, Stockholm, 1927. It is of course impossible here to enter into a discussion of the difficult question of the relations between Danes, Heruli, and Heath-bards.

5. H. G. Leach, *Angevin Britain and Scandinavia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1921), esp. pp. 6 ff.

6. Chambers, *Introduction*, pp. 333-345, gives a full and dispassionate review of this much-debated question. The time has arrived, it would appear, to consider the identification of the Geatas with the Jutes as definitely refuted.

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"There is no good evidence that anybody identified the two tribes before the rise of modern scholarship" (Kemp Malone, *Modern Language Review* [1925], xx, 1-11).

7. W. A. Craigie, *Philologica* (ed. Baudis and Wharton for the Philological Society of London, 1923-1924), ii, 12-14. Cf. chapter VIII, note 20, below.

8. The fullest discussion is in Chambers's edition. See also W. W. Lawrence, "Structure and Interpretation of *Widsith*," *Modern Philology* (1906), iv, 329-374.

9. Chambers, *op. cit.*, pp. 164, 165.

10. Those who wish to follow further the sketch of early Germanic peoples may consult Bremer, "Ethnographie der germanischen Stämme," in Paul's *Grundriss der germanischen Philologie* (1900), iii, 735 ff., and Chambers, *Widsith*. There is much new and valuable material in Hoops's *Reallexicon*.

11. On this general subject, see H. Brunner, *Deutsche Rechtsgeschichte* (Leipzig, 1887), vol. i, and the various special articles in Hoops's *Reallexicon*. Klaeber's bibliography, pp. cxlix ff., may be used to advantage.

12. *Germanic Origins*, p. 17.

13. *Epic and Romance*, p. 7.

14. Text translated by Spaeth, *Old English Poetry* (Princeton, N. J., 1922), p. 140.

15. F. Seebohm, *Tribal Custom in Anglo-Saxon Law*, London and N. Y., 1902, has a chapter on "The Evidence of Beowulf on Tribal Custom Regulating Feuds," but he assumes that the father of Beowulf was a Swede (p. 57) and from this draws far-reaching conclusions.

16. Oman, p. 282.

17. Eleanor Hull, *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), pp. 254 ff.

18. Leach, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

19. Ed. Foerster (Halle, 1891), pp. 46 ff., lines 1727 ff.; cf. translation by Comfort, *Eric and Enid*, pp. 202 ff. For an analysis of the interplay of passion and convention in chivalric tales, see S. F. Barrow, *The Medieval Society Romances*, N. Y., 1924.

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20. See the excellent manual by A. Mawer, *The Vikings*, Cambridge (Eng.) and N. Y., 1913. A selection of the very extensive bibliography of the subject is given on p. 146. Particularly useful are W. A. Craigie, *The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, London, 1906; Axel Olrik, *Nordisches Geistesleben*, Heidelberg, 1908; and Valtýr Guðmundsson, *Island i Fristatstiden*, Copenhagen, 1924.

21. The *Poetic Edda* is accessible in English in a complete translation in verse, with notes and introduction, by H. A. Bellows, American-Scandinavian Foundation, N. Y., 1923. The best treatment of the mythology in English is the translation by S. B. Hustvedt of Munch's *Norröne Gude-og Heltesagn* revised by Olsen, under the title *Norse Mythology*, American-Scandinavian Foundation, N. Y., 1926. Very useful is R. M. Meyer's *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, Leipzig, 1910. The bibliography of the subject is very extensive. For further discussion of mythology as affecting *Beowulf*, see chapter V, below. On Sigemund's dragon, see chapter VII, note 3.

22. Edition of the *Volsungasaga* by Magnus Olsen, Copenhagen, 1906–1908. The translation by Magnússon and Morris is accessible in the Scott Library, London, n.d. Cf. Morris's poetic paraphrase of the story, *Sigurd the Volsung*, London, 1904.

23. The *Prose Edda* has been rendered into English by A. G. Brodeur, American-Scandinavian Foundation, N. Y., 1916. Certain passages have been omitted. For the original, see edition by Finnur Jónsson, Copenhagen, 1900. For the skaldic verse, see Vigfusson and Powell, *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* (Oxford, 1883), vol. ii.

24. For a general discussion of the sagas, see W. A. Craigie, *The Icelandic Sagas*, Cambridge (Eng.), 1913. A special chapter is devoted to "English Translations and Other Aids," pp. 110 ff. The fullest criticism is in F. Jónsson's *Oldnorske og Oldislandske Literaturs Historie*, 3 vols., Copenhagen, 1920–1924, unfortunately not accessible in English. See especially the treatment of the subject by Mogk in Paul's *Grundriss*, vol. ii.

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25. On Danish traditions, consult especially Olrik, *Heldedigtning*, vol. i. The Lay of Bjarki is discussed in the English translation, pp. 66 ff. Excerpts from early documents are printed by Klaeber and by Chambers, *Introduction*. Further references will be given in the chapters following. For Saxo, see Bibliography, above.

## CHAPTER III

1. It is impossible to indicate here the stages by which the history of the Danish royal house has been reconstructed. See especially the important discussion in Olrik, *Heroic Legends*, pp. 12 ff. I cannot accept his conclusions in all points. Klaeber gives a classified bibliography of historical legends (pp. cxxxiv ff.), and summarizes historical elements (xxix ff.). The reflections of early historical conditions in story are set forth by Kemp Malone, *The Literary History of Hamlet*, I, Heidelberg, 1923 (*Anglistische Forschungen*, lix). Professor Malone's reconstructions are ingenious, but seem to me largely hypothetical.

2. Sarrazin explains the name Heorot as arising from the worship of an ancient hart deity (*Anglia*, xix, 372 f.). Cf. G. Schütte, *Dänisches Heidentum* (Heidelberg, 1923), p. 88.

3. The most recent discussion of the fall of the Scylding dynasty, published after the writing of the account in the text, is that by Kemp Malone, "Hrethric," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* (1927), xlii, 268-313.

4. The relations between *Beowulf* and the *Hrólfs saga* are discussed below, chapter VI.

5. A detailed argument to show that this is a prophecy, and not, as Olrik (*Heldedigtning*, ii, 37 ff.) argued, an account of events that had already occurred, will be found in my *Beowulf and the Tragedy of Finnsburg*, p. 380 n. Reconstruction of the whole tale is very difficult. Saxo and the *Hrólfs saga* must be taken with great care; their accounts are so much altered in points that are quite clear in Anglo-Saxon that they are not safe guides in the obscurer matters.

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6. See below, chapter V. On Heremod, see Chambers, *Introduction*, pp. 89 ff.

7. On Swedish historical conditions in general, see Klaeber, p. xxxviii; for bibliography, p. cxxxvi. Also Weyhe, "König Ongentheows Fall," *Englische Studien*, xxxix, 14 ff., and Belden, *Modern Language Notes* (1913), xxviii, 149 ff., a suggestive if somewhat venturesome essay.

8. Klaeber, *Anglia*, I, 242 ff., reviews later discussions as to the date of Hygelac's death, and concludes that 516 may stand.

9. Antoine Thomas, "Un manuscrit inutilisé du Liber Monstrorum," *Archivum Latinitatis medii aevi* (Union Académique internationale: Bulletin DuCange; Paris, 1925), pp. 232-245.

10. See the detailed discussion in Chambers's *Introduction*, pp. 31 ff., with reproduction of early MS. drawings illustrative of the scenes of the story. For the theory that the passage is interpolated, see chapter II, note 7.

## CHAPTER IV

1. The Anglo-Saxon text of the *Fragment* is to be found in all the editions mentioned above, and also in Bruce Dickins's *Runic and Heroic Poems*. It is also printed with notes and comment by W. S. Mackie, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (1917), xvi, 250-273. The most recent bibliography, with a list of the more important critical works, may be found in the edition by Klaeber, pp. 227 ff. See also Nellie S. Aurner, *An Analysis of the Interpretations of the Finnsburg Documents*, University of Iowa, 1917. For a detailed review of the earlier part of the story, and discussion of many points in this chapter, see W. W. Lawrence, "Beowulf and the Tragedy of Finnsburg." The best analysis of the later events is that by H. M. Ayres, "The Tragedy of Hengest in Beowulf," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (1917), xvi, 282-295.

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2. For a discussion of the vexed question of the relationship of these tribes, and references, see Klaeber, pp. 220 ff. The Eotan — or Jutes, as they would appear to be — were neighbors both of the Frisians and of the Danes, and may well have been allied, now with one and now with the other people. Klaeber asks: "Is it possible that the Ags. version embodies two distinct strata of early legend reflecting different phases of the history of the Jutes? . . . the sojourn of the Jutes in proximity to the Frisians was apt to suggest an especially close relation between these two tribes (hence *Eotan=Frysan*)."<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt on which side the sympathies of the Eotens lie in the *Episode*. It seems to me, however, highly probable that many of the difficulties in the interpretation of the tale arise from the embodiment in it of contradictory legendary elements, as in the dragon adventure.

3. The translation of this passage follows the text of Klaeber, not that of Chambers. I should prefer to put a period after line 1065, and begin a new sentence: *Ponne healgamen*, etc., but this is not of great importance. Klaeber rightly decides that 1068-1159<sup>a</sup> should not be in quotation marks, as Chambers prints it.

4. There has been much discussion as to whether the later events take place in the same locality as the earlier ones. "An unprejudiced reading gives the impression, I think, that Hengest (with Finn) stayed where he was." Klaeber, *Anglia*, 1, 229.

5. Is the Hengest of Finnsburg to be identified with the Hengest of the Conquest of Britain? The evidence is reviewed by Nellie S. Aurner, *Hengest, a Study in Early English Hero Legend* (Iowa City, 1921), pp. 56 ff., with conclusions in the affirmative. Why should the leader of the Jutes in the Conquest be identified with the Danes in the Finnsburg story? Wessén discusses this (see above, chapter II, note 4), p. 33. He thinks Hengest was conceived as a Dane, Frisians and Jutes identified, and Hengest therefore made an opponent of the people to whom he really belonged.

6. Lines 1142 ff. are especially difficult and obscure. I take them to mean: "So he [Hengest] did not prove recreant

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to his duty [the duty of vengeance] when the son of Hunlaf presented him with a sword, the edges of which were well known among the Eotens [on account of the slaughter done with it in the earlier surprise attack on the Danes]." The passage is fully discussed in my article.

7. Jiriczek, 49.

8. Chambers's views are set forth briefly in his edition, p. 167, and very fully in his *Introduction*, pp. 245-289. The comments of Klaeber, *Anglia*, I, 224 ff., should be noted, in addition to those in his edition.

9. Chambers says, "That the Frisians are not to taunt the Danes with following the slayer of their lord is only one of two possible explanations of the ll. 1101-3" (*Introduction*, p. 271). But that the *Danes* were not to mention the fact that they were following the slayer of their lord, which I take to be the alternative reading, seems to me very forced. The simple and natural interpretation, especially in view of the fact that the whole lay is sung to a Danish audience, appears to me to be that all of lines 1098-1106 is a summary of Finn's promises.

10. R. A. Williams, *The Finn Episode in Beowulf*, Cambridge (Eng.), 1924. Professor Williams tells us that his study started in the conviction that the second part of the Nibelung story might serve to supply missing elements in the Finnsburg tale. His reconstruction of the latter, in briefest form, is as follows: Hnæf, prince of the Hocings, a tribe dependent upon the Danes, and also called Eotens, is invited by Finn, king of the Frisians, who covets his treasure, to become Finn's vassal. Hengest, Hnæf's chief retainer, does not like this proposal, but is overruled, and with Hnæf visits Finn's court, the treasure being carried along with them. One of Finn's sons plays a trick on the Danes, and in retaliation Hengest smites off the boy's head, and attacks the Frisians. Hnæf insists that peace be restored, but that night Hnæf is attacked by Finn and his men and killed. The treasure passes to Finn, who then schemes to bring also the Half-Danes in Denmark under his sway. He allows Guthlaf and Oslaf to return home, ostensibly with this proposal, but they return with Danish

troops, and take, with Hengest, a bloody vengeance on Finn.

Having worked this out, Professor Williams was "faced by the problem of reconciling this reconstruction with the text of the Episode in *Beowulf*." Disregarding, as far as possible, this reconstruction, he attacked the ambiguities of the text. "To my great pleasure," he continues, "the results gained harmonized fully with my reconstruction" (pp. v, vi). It seems to me, whether Professor Williams was conscious of it or not, that this harmony was gained by forcing the text of the *Episode* into the Procrustean bed of the Nibelung story. Simple and obvious readings are tortured to give new meanings. Great stress is laid upon logic as a guide, but logic takes queer turns. Although he puts analysis of the text first in his book, he later says, "The whole construction I give [that is, the reconstruction of the Finn story from the Burgundian saga] is . . . only a hypothesis, for which I claim no value except in so far as it allows us to deduce from it the text of the Finn Episode" (p. 113). He also states schematically the logical process for his whole reconstruction of the one story from the other. "If . . . in the incomplete saga, X, we find a part A which likewise exists in the complete saga, Y, compared with it, and if in the latter we find another part, B, organically related to A, but missing in X, there is a presumption that B was also present in X; and if this fills a gap and is not contradicted by anything else in X, the presence of B in the latter may be considered as established" (p. 111). This I flatly deny. Saga is not logical. Situations and motives recur again and again, but in bewildering complexity and with changing motivation.

Professor Williams's book is reviewed by Kemp Malone, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (1926), xxv, 114-117, who gives a reconstruction of the story in a later article (*Ibid.*, pp. 157-172), which differs in some respects from that which I have outlined above.